THE
FOREVER MARATHON
JAMESON CURRIER

A wickedly delightful war of wits and whines between longtime companions during a two-day fight.

The Forever Marathon

From their meeting as struggling graduate students in Manhattan to becoming the owners of expensive foreign cars and a country house in Pennsylvania, Jesse and Adam have spent twenty-four cantankerous years as significant others—half of their lives. Now in their late forties, a small domestic fight swells between the gay couple into a major battle, ensnaring a talkative, opportunistic young man as collateral damage.

"With *The Forever Marathon*, Jameson Currier offers a fast-paced and incisive portrait of forty-eight hours in the life of a challenging twenty-four-year relationship. In the story of Adam and Jesse, Currier daringly probes the underside of passion, where need turns too easily into entitlement and love skids heedlessly toward hate. Currier demonstrates powerful insights into the history of a relationship: how assumptions and misunderstandings can set lovers off course, how hearts harden in the wake of disappointment, and how essential it is to remember the love that underlies it all, even in the darkest moments. These are vividly drawn characters who come to life on the page, with feelings and experiences that not only touch the reader but will no doubt resonate personally for many."
—Lewis DeSimone, author of *The Heart's History* and *Chemistry*

"The opposite of love is not hate but rather indifference. Thanks to the talent of Jameson Currier, readers are never at risk for feeling indifferent to the couple at the heart of his *The Forever Marathon*. Adoration mingled with aversion at this pair's antics ensures every page will be read with enthusiasm. We should all be grateful that Currier has not shied away from presenting an honest depiction of gay men in their late forties."
—Steve Berman, editor of the *Best Gay Stories* annual series

"A writer who consistently surprises and delights, Currier's dynamism will surely carry his literary career to higher heights."
—Bay Area Reporter

Also by Jameson Currier

Dancing on the Moon: Short Stories about AIDS

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Where the Rainbow Ends

The Forever Marathon

a novel

Jameson Currier

Chelsea Station Editions
New York

The Forever Marathon
by Jameson Currier

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First U.S. Edition

The Forever Marathon

To
Martin
and
Larry

What relationship is easy?

What couple doesn't fight?

Adam was six-one and in great shape for a man his age; he had six-pack abs and less than eight percent body fat, even though his hair had turned white when he was thirty-three and he refused to dye it darker, fearing it would make himself look phony and too vain. Now, at forty-nine, he worked out every weekday morning at the gym with Donnie, a bodybuilder eighteen years his junior, before driving his Porsche Carrera convertible to the hospital in the Lehigh Valley where he was the senior psychiatrist on staff. He was a stern and disciplined boss with his employees and the other residents, but willing to be a sympathetic father figure when a colleague needed help with finances or time off to settle family matters. His patients and their relatives found him concerned and compassionate, capable of dusting off a doctor's professional detachment when it was needed. In his spare time, he scoured the tables at the local flea markets and attended estate auctions looking for furniture and artwork to decorate his renovated farmhouse in the rural countryside of eastern Pennsylvania, a ninety-minute journey from Manhattan. Driving along the winding snow-covered lanes or beside the lush green banks of the Delaware River, he dreamed about uncovering a rare treasure that a dealer had overlooked, winning a bodybuilding contest, and finding a younger, thinner lover.

Jesse was five-eleven with a widening waist he could no longer contain in his "fat pants." Exercising only increased his appetite, his sex drive, and his animosity toward Adam because they had aged differently. He was also forty-nine, had curly brown, thinning hair, and now required eyeglasses for reading and driving. What Jesse lacked in drop-dead physical attributes he made up with a fabulous and witty personality. He could be self-effacing or ironic; at dinner parties he was an eager and mesmerizing storyteller, usually casting Adam as an antagonist, victim, or buffoon. Jesse believed he had an artist's esthetic and temperament, though he had realized long ago that he had grand ambitions and not a shred of talent. After three stressful business careers and a family inheritance, he preferred to spend his days shopping, watching movies, and catching up with friends. He dreamed of losing weight overnight at the flick of a fairy wand and meeting Prince Charming the following day. After living with Adam for twenty-four years, almost half his life, he had never lost his desire for romance and adventure, nor abandoned his sense of humor.

This was how it was in the autumn of 2004.

Friday

The fight began over clothes. Dry cleaning, to be exact.

Adam stepped into the kitchen and asked Jesse if he could pick up the dry cleaning that morning. It wasn't an unusual request. It was the way it was worded.

"Can you pick up the dry cleaning?" Adam asked. "The ticket's by my wallet."

"I don't have time," Jesse answered. "It's a busy day."

"What do you mean?"

"I have plans. I'm not spending it picking up your clothes."

"What plans?"

"I might go into the city."

"You *might*? What does that mean?"

"It means I'm trying to catch the bus."

"And the dry cleaning is out of your way?"

"It will sit in the car all day. You want that?"

"It would if I picked it up."

"Then pick it up."

"I'm running late."

"So am I."

Jesse knew he looked selfish, but Adam had the capacity of treating him like a servant and not a lover. Adam no longer shopped for groceries, cleaned the kitchen, or picked up the laundry—there were others to do that for him (and usually it was Jesse who had to orchestrate the chores). Instead, Adam was full of commands to keep their home running the way he wanted it maintained: "Will you call Jason about spraying the bushes?" "Can you replace the light in the front hall?" "Will you take the Porsche in for service?" Jesse knew that Adam was jealous of Jesse's free time, days when he didn't have anything planned and could spend hours reading a book, chatting with a stranger on line, or riding the bus into Manhattan. Adam thought Jesse was shopping for an excuse to leave him. For twenty-four years they had always maintained a delicate balance, a "don't ask, don't tell" arrangement of their other sexual partners. Neither partner wanted the relationship to end, only for it to be able to "bear and bend." Adam knew Jesse had an eager and roving eye. Jesse was certain Adam was having some kind of an affair with "Big

Donnie," his trainer at the gym. None of this had ever been seen as a threat to the other, except, of course, when things became heated.

"Will you be back tonight?" Adam asked, jangling his car keys in his grip, after he had finished the cup of coffee Jesse had made for him.

"Not if I get lucky," Jesse answered and walked out the back door.

* * *

Adam carried his anger to the car, to the end of the driveway, to the crossroads and past their neighbor's barns and his harvested field of hay, past the old white clapboard Methodist church and the graveyard with the broken tombstones and beyond the general store and post office that had been a fixture in the village for more than a century. He knew it was useless to change Jesse's resentment, whatever was at its root. Jesse was unshapable. Jesse hated the fact that he couldn't control Adam's life, that Adam had a career and an agenda that existed and manipulated him outside of their home. Jesse was co-dependent and sharp as a whip, two traits that battled with his fits of attention deficit disorder; he hated to spend time alone with himself, hated to be trapped in a mundane chore of cleaning dishes, but Adam did not have the time or patience to babysit and keep Jesse entertained. Adam's professional diagnosis would have been that Jesse displayed typical conflict resolution symptoms, though he knew from actual experience it was a more complex diagnosis. (There were also hints of parental and narcissistic issues, obsessive-compulsive behavior, borderline personality disorder, impulse control disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, and, of course, adult attention deficit disorder.) But the fighting could be triggered by anything these days and, the truth of the matter was, that after twenty-four years of living with each other they had simply both grown apart and into two different people than they were when they first met—yet neither were ready to give it all up, toss the relationship into the trash and hope to start over with another guy—twenty-four years was twenty-four years, after

all, and they were both willing to be dependent on each other while wanting to maintain their independence.

But it *still* wasn't easy.

In the locker room of the gym, Adam changed out of his business clothes and into shorts and a tank top. A nastiness churned in his gut. There was a slight burning at his ankles, a flare up of eczema, no doubt from the shouting match in his mind with Jesse that was certain to further escalate over the dry cleaning. Adam searched through his kit for his medicated lotion, then remembered he had used it last week after battling Jesse over repairing the satellite reception on the bedroom television and tossed the tube away.

On the workout floor Adam's annoyance flared again. His trainer Donnie was nowhere to be found. Donnie usually arrived late with a string of excuses. "My kid was sick," or "My old lady made me take her to the doctor," or "I had car trouble," or "I had to make a run to the grocery store for eggs." Donnie was thirty-one years old, six-two with a fifty-three-inch chest and twenty-one-inch arms; he had been fired as a bodyguard, refused to alter his training schedule to be a bouncer at a nightclub, and failed to get his pro bodybuilding card because he wasn't "as cut up as the other dudes." Donnie had three kids—all girls—and another one on the way with his live-in girlfriend, Sherry. Adam found her an unpleasant woman, shrill and suspicious, always wanting to know Donnie's every move, convinced that Donnie was going to leave her without any financial support. As it was, Donnie was always borrowing money to keep things going, though "things" always seemed nebulous to Adam when Donny tried to substantiate his finances—and he often wondered if drugs or gambling or other ventures and scams were at the root of all this hardship. Adam had paid him a year in advance for his personal training sessions, on top of loaning a few extra thousand dollars which Donnie kept promising he would pay back soon. Jesse taunted Adam that he was trying to bait a straight man into sleeping with him. "Pay him enough and he'll feel obligated to have sex with you," Jesse said, "just to knock down the balance." It was true that he had some kind of big-brother-worship obsession going on with Donnie, but Adam liked to believe that it wasn't sexually related—

Donnie was serious about training and dieting and he had kept up Adam's motivation to keep in shape—Adam would only admit to being slightly narcissistic, no different than any other man his age. Gay or straight.

Adam started with cardio on the treadmill. He kept the pace slow, his legs wobbly with the first impacts. Something had to change with Jesse. It wasn't about sex. The sex wasn't too kinky or too experimental or too adventurous. It was unfulfilling because it simply didn't exist. There was nothing. Not a shred of affection remained in or out of the sack. They were more like roommates who fought than bickering lovers and longtime companions. Couples counseling had only magnified their faults. Jesse thought Adam was condescending and unhelpful around the house. Adam thought Jesse made him high strung and combative. Sex was not even a relevant issue they could discuss with a therapist. Sometimes Adam felt their fights were now how they communicated with each other, how they expressed their affection, or, at least, what was left of it. If anything *was* left.

As he started to sweat, Adam imagined the headlines if his latest fight with Jesse became their last: "GAY LOVERS DIE IN BLOODY DUEL." The photos would show their stiffened corpses with their hands clasped at each other's throat. Two stubborn, bull-headed gay men trying to find a way to live with each other. Hopefully, a reporter would uncover the true facts behind the crime, that though they had lived together for twenty-four years—shared the same bed and silverware and laundry detergent—they had not had sex with each other in more than five years—and that had only been a passionate kiss performed on cue in front of friends and relatives at their nineteenth anniversary party. Adam really didn't want to kill Jesse. (Well, not every day or every minute.) He only wanted to find something to love about him and a reason to remain together. How were they going to handle the next twenty-four years? Or should they?

As he jogged faster, Adam checked the clock by the water fountain. The TV screen on the wall was tuned in to *The Today Show*. There was no sound unless you used earphones and Adam

didn't like to run with cords dangling around his chest—so all he could do was run and stew. Run and stew. His eyes flicked back and forth to the clock and the workout floor in search of Donnie. After three miles, he stopped and went to the members' desk.

"Did Donnie leave a message?" he asked the girl, Debbie, the chesty, overweight teenager who worked the desk in the mornings.

"I thought that was explained to you, Dr. O'Donnell," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"New policy. No outside trainers are allowed. You have to use a staff trainer."

The anger rose in Adam's stomach and flushed up his chest and out of his throat like a rush of vomit. "What do you mean—*new policy*? You can't just change the policy without telling someone in advance about it." Every month this gym had another new owner or new partner trying to change something that didn't need changing. Every morning when Adam parked his car beside the back entrance of the low-rent one-story brick building that housed the gym, he expected to find the doors padlocked and a sign that read, "Out of Business." This morning there were only four members working out, two less than usual.

"We can't have the risk," Debbie said, taking a step back from her desk as Adam's anger flushed his face. "Insurance."

"There's nothing like this in my membership contract," he said. "I've been coming here for years. With my own trainer."

"I can have a manager talk to you," she said. "Would that help?"

"Tell the owner to call me at the hospital," Adam said, his rage snapping into his voice. "I'd hate to have to file a lawsuit to shut you guys down for good."

Adam went back to the treadmill, fumbled with the keypads, then gave up on his workout when he was haunted by concerns that he was behaving badly, spoiled and privileged and ungrateful, and that he had treated Debbie as badly as he had Jesse, as if she were Jesse. At the root of all this was the idea that Donnie might have shown up and been turned away. Donnie liked to remain incommunicado. He didn't own a cellphone, never wore a pager, never called his house for messages once he had left in the mornings. Donnie could

get away with being passive-aggressive because he knew everyone looked up to him, idolized him. He was the guy they all wanted to be—massive, muscular, masculine. *Sought after.*

In the locker room Adam sat on a bench and tried to calm himself—he had to find a way out of this anger—there was always something infuriating him. He knew he was high strung. His blood pressure would rise when he felt this way. All this anger wasn't healthy. His professional diagnosis of his own behavior could be blunt—attention deficit hyperactivity disorder with obsessive and repetitive routines, compounded by anxiety, depression, fear of losing control. But he was also smart enough to realize he could overdiagnose any of his characteristics—a symptom could have one or many causes. So maybe it wasn't entirely Jesse's fault—maybe he couldn't blame *just Jesse* for the way he had become. Maybe it was too much stress at the hospital, too much expectation from people and places where he should really expect nothing, nothing at all. Adam was ready to storm out of the gym but unwilling to display his anger to the satisfaction of the staff. And he didn't want to begin the day at work feeling this way.

He slipped out of his workout clothes and wrapped a towel around his waist and went to the steam room. He would sit in the mist and relax. The steam would do him good until he was calmer and ready to shower and shave.

Of course the steam was vanishing—not thick and hot and stinging as Adam liked—but after a few minutes some moisture had worked its way in and out of Adam's skin. The steam room was small and brightly lit, a hint of mildew mingling with bleach. Adam missed the gym he had gone to in Chelsea when he and Jesse had lived in Manhattan. That steam room had always been a place of refuge and release—there was always someone stroking himself or willing to reach out and fondle a cock. The memory aroused Adam. He sat and remembered the time he had worked up the courage to approach a young man, thin and blond-haired and godlike—usually Adam was a voyeur rather than a participant in the club's sexual escapades. It was thrilling to be engaging in sex in a semi-public space for the sheer pleasure of it—the young man

was willing to be touched and handled, his skin slick with moisture and sweat. Nothing else had come of it, however. No name or phone numbers had been exchanged—no thank you or even a grunt of satisfaction—just a flash of his ass a few minutes later in the shower room followed by a look that showed Adam he was not remembered at all. He had been used and discarded like a sexual toy.

The experience with the godlike blond had seldom been repeated, a rush of fear always preventing Adam from taking the next step with other men. What if he were rejected? Or reprimanded? Or arrested? Adam didn't want a sexual fantasy to be a defining motivation about him. What he really wanted was lust *and* love. *Together*.

Adam stared at a rusty drain at the center of the floor a little too long. *Funny how loneliness haunted you even when you were in a relationship*, he thought. *Odd how you only wanted someone to be more like yourself.* What had he done to cause Jesse to stop loving him? Why had Jesse's concern turned to bitterness? If he was capable of diagnosing this, was he capable of changing it? Changing himself?

In the locker room, in front of the mirror, Adam rinsed his face and lathered his beard with shaving cream. The storm inside him had calmed. While he shaved, he studied his reflection. The chest was good, pecs solid, no detectable sag yet, covered with a layer of white, wiry hairs he refused to trim or shave away. He'd always wanted better arms and for years had been forced to live with more triceps than biceps definition. He had been able to bulk up his shoulders and back with the routine Donnie had set out for him, but those "big guns" he had admired in other bodybuilders had eluded him.

But it was a good, solid body. Adam knew that. Things were not in a decline yet. He was still in the game. Still running the race. Out of the corner of the reflection of the mirror Adam saw Shane, one of the gym's staff trainers, at his locker. Shane was a stocky, fair-skinned guy in his late teens, a local boy who'd been able to stay out of jail because he had been a high school football star. Years ago, a boy like Shane would have gone to work at the mills or the

steel factories when he hadn't gotten an athletic scholarship, and Shane had been lucky that sports had helped him avoid that satanic cult-videogame death grip that had plagued a lot of other boys in his generation Adam had seen as patients. But instead of settling down into a job or finding a decent career, Shane had matured into trouble, a patchwork of off-the-books flirts and hustles with whomever he could shamelessly entangle. Or so Adam had heard.

"Hey, Doc," Shane said, when Adam lifted his head away from the sink and dried his face with a towel. "When you gonna let me borrow that Porsche of yours?"

"You can borrow it anytime you want," Adam answered. "What do I get as collateral?"

"I can get you a widescreen plasma TV," Shane said. "Big ass thing. Real steep discount too. iPod, if you want one. Plenty of laptops, some stuff you might never have seen. Name your price."

"Hot stuff?" Adam asked.

"Plenty hot," Shane answered, arching an eyebrow.

Shane was a few inches shorter than Adam, well-built with thick, plump muscles. He had a pierced eyebrow, a shaved scalp, and a thin, blond, sea captain's beard without a mustache which gave him a scruffy, punkish look. Some days while working out Adam imagined what it would be like to take Shane to bed. He was certain Shane could be wicked and wild and willing to do whatever Adam wanted if Shane ever gave into the idea of sex with another man, even though the young man continually hinted that he was strictly into chicks. Adam considered this nothing but a straight boy's taunt of an older gay man, part of Shane's ongoing seduction to earn a few extra bucks by coercing Adam into something that included the potential of sex without delivering on the goods. Adam could hear Jesse's delightfully shocked reaction: "Another straight boy? When are you going to learn?"

Adam noticed Shane studying his body in the mirror and it gave Adam a hopeful thrill.

"Hey, Doc. I can get you a kit, if you want. A whole package to help with those arms. You could be awesome with some bigger guns."

The comment rattled Adam deeper than expected. Not the suggestion of steroids. The hint that his body was somehow imperfect and undesirable the way it was—and that because of this, Shane was unattainable and unavailable.

Adam flipped his eyes back to his own reflection. Instead of imagining his arms bigger, more defined, he saw the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes when he nervously smiled at Shane. Adam was the opposite of Shane. He could never be wild and willing and wicked in or out of bed. He had grown too cautious, worried something would go wrong. One wrong step might cause another and another, the catalyst of a downfall. Adam had tried several over-the-counter weight plans and metabolism products, all without much success, but injecting illegal steroids? If he was caught he could lose his medical license. His practice. His career would be over. In his mind he heard Jesse's horrified shriek, "*What were you thinking?*"

Adam's smile tensed and pressed and lengthened and flattened into frown lines. The anger was back, fueling a knot in his stomach and traveling slowly up his chest and into his throat.

"Listen, Doc," Shane said, following Adam back to his locker. "My mom's got a bad knee. You think you can write her something for that? And maybe something to help her sleep?"

"I might have a few samples," Adam answered too quickly for comfort, hoping the mention of the trial packages he received from pharmaceutical reps might be a way to say "sure" without saying "no," something that Adam could easily forget about. "Check me later at the hospital."

"Sure thing, Doc," Shane replied and disappeared to find his next hustle.

A few minutes later Adam had forgotten about the exchange; he was dressed in a suit and seated at the wheel of his Porsche and thinking about his patient load for the day. The Carrera was a source of pride to Adam, his personal medal for surmounting the obstacles of poverty, medical school, and Jesse. Jesse hated the car, hated the way he thought other drivers looked at them when they were riding in the car—laughing at them, not with them, two aging *faygelahs* out for a spin. Adam inserted his key into the ignition and the car

turned over once and stalled. When he tried it a second time the key locked up and wouldn't move. His chest tightened and burned. He pounded his fist against the steering wheel—wham! wham! *wham!* The anger was back. Worse than before.

The first call Adam made was to Jesse. The next was to the Porsche dealer. Then he went back inside the gym to look for help.

* * *

On the bus ride to Manhattan Jesse squinted and tried to read the newspaper classifieds, but the print was too small and the ride too shaky. He started and stopped several times scanning the small print in the column of the rental listings, worried about creating a headache which he might carry around the rest of the day. At the back of his mind, Jesse thought that an apartment in the city which he and Adam could use once or twice a week might be just the thing to settle things down. It could be like the old days, when they had first bought the house in the country to escape the cramped city apartment. Only in reverse.

They had found the stone cottage on Ingham Road on their first visit to Bucks County to see a realtor; Jesse had grown up in the suburbs of south Jersey and he knew the area around Doylestown and New Hope and the Delaware River. The cottage had been built in the mid-nineteenth century and had a large kitchen and a formal dining room, which Adam and Jesse used to throw dinner parties to meet other local gay couples or entertain their city friends visiting for the weekend. Upstairs was a small guest bedroom and the master bedroom and bath, a cathedral-ceilinged addition designed and built by an architect during the Fifties. Adam had begun collecting quilts and folk art, shepherding back to the house cast-iron horse weathervanes, cowboy whirligigs, bald, eyeless mannequin heads, and multicolored hand-hooked rugs. Jesse found this hobby mildly amusing—he even liked some of the larger antiques Adam trucked in—the Mississippi pie safe and the Amish farm table—until he discovered how much money Adam was spending.

"We could take a trip to Hawaii for that much," Jesse had said,

about a carousel horse Adam set up in a corner of the dining room. "*First class.*"

"You said you could get us a good deal to Hawaii."

"That's not the point. We don't need something this expensive."

"But I like it. This is exactly what I wanted."

"What about what I want? You made me take down my movie posters. Doris Day! Audrey Hepburn! Marilyn Monroe! Do you know how much those are worth? *Let's Make Love* is a collector's item."

"I thought we wanted more *art*."

"*Art*? A table with scratches is *art*?"

Six years and more than five thousand fights over antiques and *tchotchkes* later, Adam decided to accept a psychiatric residency at a hospital near Easton and Jesse was ready to sever his ties with the city. They gave up their Manhattan apartment on Greenwich Street and bought a larger house on the bluffs above the Delaware River, another farmhouse from the nineteenth century, a stucco-over-stone cottage with a barn on almost twenty acres of land, plenty of room for Adam's expanding art collection and a large attic which Jesse turned into an office. A new Great Room was constructed. Windows from a salvage dealer were shipped up from New Orleans, the one-hundred-fifty-year-old beams arrived from Lancaster, and the front steps, once part of the old courthouse in Doylestown, were installed.

At their new "estate," Adam and Jesse's dinner parties grew into elaborate outdoor affairs—barbecues with canvas tenting and lantern-lit gazebos on the grounds, caterers busing hors d'oeuvres from the city, a string quartet or a cabaret singer hired to perform in the new Great Room—all of which Jesse would spend weeks on, planning the endless details by phone and e-mail. And for what? A few oohs and aahs from their guests over landscaping and material possessions? Jesse barely got a thank-you kiss from Adam after each affair. It amused and annoyed him that they had now created two different personas as a couple: the adoring loving one for their guests and casual friends, and another, more combative one in

private. After a year of going to a couples counselor without much progress, the therapist turned to Adam and said, "I hope you add me to the guest list of your next party."

When the jiggling and jostling of the bus and the tiny print made it too difficult to continue, Jesse folded the paper and found his earphones, listening to a new CD he had bought the week before, of an aging pop star singing classic American pop songs. Jesse knew the lyrics to almost every song, and the singer's seductive and gravelly voice gave him hope that he could one day do something like this himself. Jesse had always felt that he could express himself best while singing. Some day he would get up and sing in front of an audience about love gone wrong, love gone bad, love gone kablooey because there was no other place for it to go. He'd sing his heart out in a dimly lit cabaret, full of smoke and colored spotlights, surrounded by his closest friends, Adam's staff at the hospital, and a brand new handsome beau who'd think only of him. He'd move them all to tears and applause. He'd show them all that even in his dullest moments, his life had meaning. He would be an inspiration to others. He would be popular, cheered, *loved*.

When the bus arrived at Port Authority, Jesse checked the time on his cellphone. There was a voicemail from Adam. The message began in a soft whisper and ended in a roar: "Jesse, sweetie, did you take the Porsche in for servicing like I asked you to? I'm stuck at the gym because it won't start! Now my whole day is ruined. Everything is going to be late and I'm going to miss my patients' appointments! Did you take the Porsche in for servicing or not?"

Jesse stepped off the bus, made it a few steps into the gate of the terminal, when he was consumed with fury. He dialed Adam's cellphone and was sent into voicemail. "No, Adam, dearest, why would I take the Porsche into the dealer for servicing?" Jesse yelled. "The Porsche is not *my* car. It is not *our* car. It is *your* car. You wanted the Porsche. You picked out the Porsche. I don't see you lifting a finger to take my car to the garage. Or filling it up with gas when you use it because your lousy Porsche is always breaking down. Maybe this will teach you a lesson that you can't rely on everyone else to do your work for you. If it's not working it's because you've only got

yourself to blame. Not somebody else."

He felt better when he hung up. Confident, edgy, aggressive, like a true New Yorker should. At the curb he hailed a taxi and gave the driver the address of his doctor's office uptown. He missed the city. He missed the guy he used to be.

* * *

They had lived together first on Tenth Street on the east side of Fifth Avenue. Adam had been sharing a First Avenue studio with another medical school student before Jesse had asked Adam to move in. Jesse had found the apartment when he had moved to the city after college in Boston, and he had wooed Adam by inviting him over again and again for elaborately cooked dinners, followed by sex. Tenth Street wasn't much of a step up for Adam; their apartment was on the ground floor, near the building's entrance, and it was impossible for Adam to concentrate because of the flow of residents and visitors in and out of the building, the door slamming and the buzzer sounding and the echo of voices bouncing off the yellowing ceramic tiles in the lobby.

But they were in love. They cooked meals for each other, stopped studying to have sex, and slept entwined in a narrow single bed. They took breaks to see foreign films on the tiny screens at the Quad Cinema on Thirteenth Street, went to see friends performing in off-off Broadway workshops, shopped for second-hand clothing on Canal Street, and sampled the Chinese take-out until they discovered their favorite Thai restaurant near Washington Square.

It disappointed Adam when Jesse dropped out of law school, but Jesse knew he was never cut out for it—law school bored him—all that reading and studying and memorizing, his mind too crammed and crowded with cases and issues and facts and not a bit of it entertaining or fun. Adam felt Jesse had dropped out too early, didn't understand law school's full potential or minor benefits, though he had never held the decision against Jesse—it had never turned into the source of one of their fights. When Jesse made the shift from being a law student to entering the work force and earning an

income, they were able to move to a larger apartment in the West Village—a small loft on the sixth floor of a renovated building on Greenwich Street with an elevator and a part-time doorman. The extra space and the extra income had saved their relationship, or so they both thought.

But dropping out of law school had deeply disappointed Jesse's father, a lawyer himself who was footing Jesse's bills. Thinking of that apartment, of those long-ago days of hating law school and loving being in love, Jesse also thought of his father as his cab stalled in traffic near Fifth Avenue and Central Park. He flipped open the cover of his cellphone and dialed his father's home in New Jersey.

"Hi Dad, how do you feel today?"

"Little better, little worse."

"What does that mean?"

"What it means."

"Be more specific."

"Chest doesn't hurt and I want a girlfriend."

Three years ago Jesse's father had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at the age of sixty-six, and the gradual witnessing of his father's mental and physical deterioration was painful to accept, in part because Jesse had always been compared to his father—in looks, in temperament, and in behavior—and in part, because of the dark decline Adam had painted for Jesse's father. Jesse harbored a resentment of Adam's "professional detached" insider view of what to expect. Last month, Jesse's father was not able to walk without the assistance of a cane, and his dad had nixed the idea of a wheelchair, out of pride and stubbornness and vanity. Jesse's father had always been independent and strong-willed, both in business and in his personal relationships, and his dad grew easily distressed over the constant need of assistance from others.

"Where's Carole?" Jesse asked. Carole was his father's fourth wife, a tiny, big-haired blonde from Alabama who was twenty-two years younger than his father—and two years younger than Jesse. She had been married to his father for twelve years, surviving mostly because his dad loved to dote on her daughter, Melissa, buying her dresses and jewelry. Melissa was now twenty-two and already the

sort of woman her mother was at the age she married Jesse's dad: *relentless and greedy*.

"Out spending my money, where else?"

It didn't bother Jesse that his father complained so openly about Carole—his fourth wife spent too much time doing her hair and going to tennis lessons and not enough effort keeping the house clean or groceries in the refrigerator, always leaving to go clothes shopping with one of her girlfriends, which Jesse's father was certain was a code word for afternoon tête-à-têtes with a younger lover. Jesse's Dad would have divorced Carole years ago if he hadn't overlooked drafting a pre-nuptial agreement.

But his father's marriage couldn't prevent Jesse from examining his own relationship. If he and Adam were married, legally wed in a monogamous heterosexual union like his father's, sanctified and blessed and licensed and protected by government and religion, they would never have stayed together. Jesse's relationship with Adam had lasted longer than any of his father's marriages, but Jesse also wondered if he had inherited his father's general dissatisfaction—some kind of chromosome that genetically indicated it was time for him to find a new mate, to get up off his butt and look for someone better. Or someone on the side. It was an even odder mystery to him that he could not break away from Adam, just as his father now refused to leave Carole. Was it fear that kept Jesse treading in place? The shame of becoming a cliché and stereotype: a bitter old lonely gay man. Too old and too bitter to find a better lover.

"Your sister wants you to come over for brunch tomorrow," his father said.

"I'll try."

"What does that mean, you'll try? You've got something better to do than visit your own flesh and blood?"

He didn't want to point out to his father that his sister Melissa was really his *step*sister, Carole's daughter before her marriage to Jesse's father, and therefore not really his own flesh and blood. Their relation was only due to marriage and Jesse had never bonded with her in the way that his father had wanted. Jesse found Melissa selfish and spoiled, and not at all interested in Jesse's own life, which made

him less interested in hers. But Jesse didn't want to start a fight with his father. He wondered if he had inherited that trait as well—that distinct and undeniable characteristic of confrontation. If perhaps his often-foul and cranky manner had started in his mother's womb.

"I'm in the city today, Dad."

"What business you have there?"

"Some appointments."

"Be specific."

"A doctor and a lunch date."

"Together or separate."

"Separate."

"Any reason for a doctor?"

"Just a consultation."

"If it's nothing important then you can check out this lady friend of mine on Park Avenue South."

"What would I want to see her for?"

"Not for you. For me. Check her out for me."

"How did you meet her?"

"Haven't. We've been chatting on line."

"Tell her you don't have any money," Jesse said. "Then see if she's interested."

"Oh, she's interested."

"Why do you say that?"

"She wants to leave her husband. And I want her to drive my wife out of the house."

"How is she going to do that?"

"She's a slob. So she claims."

"You couldn't live with that," Jesse said. His father had always made sure he kept a spotless house, even going to the point of hiring maids and cooks and babysitters when there was no wife to orchestrate it for him. Jesse was aware that Adam's lack of doing chores was a little too similar to his father's behavior, though he refused to believe that Adam had ever conjured up a father-figure fantasy for him, or worse, of himself transformed into a beautiful geisha adoring her white-haired patron. "And Carole would have her dusting in a minute."

"Who's Carole?" his father asked, and Jesse knew his father wasn't kidding. His dad's voice was weaker. Over the phone there was the sound of coughing and hacking, of his father clearing his throat and chest of phlegm.

"Carole's your wife, Dad."

There was a louder cough, followed by expletives that if Jesse had uttered them, his dad would have threatened spanking or washing his mouth out with soap, even at this age. Jesse couldn't tell if his father's obscenities were from the pain of coughing or the pain of living with Carole.

Jesse's cab had reached his destination, the southeast corner of Seventy-Ninth Street and Third Avenue. "You okay, Dad?" Jesse asked. "I gotta run."

"Go run," his father said. "Be thankful you got two legs that work and can run."

* * *

The mechanic arrived an hour later. Adam had sat on a bench in the locker room using his cellphone and pager to talk with the nurses and other doctors at the hospital, saying that a dual knockout of a family crisis and car trouble was preventing him from reaching the hospital for his early morning appointments. Adam had the morning nurse, a bossy middle-aged woman named Thea, go over charts and meds while he checked them against the notes he kept in his briefcase. Adam was lucky that these sort of incidents were few and far between—he seldom arrived late, seldom called in sick, seldom let the weather or errands interfere with his commute and his work schedule—and Dr. Kestenbaum had agreed to cover Adam's regular outpatient load until Adam arrived. In the locker room, Shane had circled Adam like a buzzard waiting for the body to drop so he could dismantle the carcass or check his pockets for spare change, hoping Adam might leave something behind because he was flustered—a watch, his cellphone, his pager, his credit card.

Adam refused to feel defeated. He only wanted his life under

control. He would make some changes. He would sell the Porsche. He would lighten his patient load. He would change gyms. He would tell Donnie that he needed to begin making a monthly effort to repay the loans. But what about Jesse? What could he do to get along better with Jesse? To keep the relationship going? Or had it finally reached its end?

Out in the parking lot, the mechanic, a short balding man with a big chest and a bigger gut, tried the ignition, opened the hood, and said that there was nothing he could do to get a Porsche running. He was the type of fellow who shoved his cap up against the top of his forehead and rubbed his brow, as though he was confused, but Adam knew that it was an act, a posturing performance he had to do for the person he had to perform it for to offer reassurance and conclude the transaction. "Out of my league," the mechanic said. He told Adam the only alternative was to tow it back to the dealer for servicing.

There was a squeeze of pain at the center of Adam's chest. He had purchased a truly expensive high-end fully-loaded lemon of a car, just like Jesse reminded him all the time.

"How long will it take?"

"Can't say."

"Can you give me a lift to the hospital?" Adam asked him.

"Not on the way."

"Can you get them to send me a loaner?"

"That'll take a while."

Yes, he would definitely sell the Porsche. When Adam went back inside the gym to ask Debbie for the number of a taxi service (knowing that she wouldn't have such a thing), Shane was standing behind her at the desk. The two of them were looking at members' records on a computer screen. Adam knew from their embarrassed expressions that he had caught them doing something they shouldn't be doing, most likely checking financial information—credit card numbers, banking accounts, street addresses—anything that could be illegally used later. No doubt Shane was at the bottom of this and Shane had found Debbie an easy pushover.

"I could give you a lift, Doc," Shane said. "Taxi would take a while.

No other morning work-out appointments except for yours."

Adam nodded and checked his watch. "I'll be glad to pay for the ride."

"Even better. But you might want to leave that here," Shane said, indicating Adam's briefcase. "It'll be safe behind the desk. Unless you want to keep it in a locker."

"What do you mean?" Adam asked.

"You'll need both hands."

Shane's lift turned out to be the back half of a Harley Wide-Glide, and Adam's first instinct was to dismiss Shane's offer, but he worried that if he appeared scared and frightened to ride on the back of a motorcycle his reputation at the gym could change in an instant. Suddenly, the staff would consider him a "sissy boy"—or worse—Big Donnie would find out he was gutless.

Adam locked his briefcase up in a locker, asking Debbie that the lock not be cut off overnight. "That'll be an extra charge," Debbie told him.

"Bill my account," Adam said, deciding at that moment that he would definitely change gyms if he survived the motorcycle ride to the hospital.

"You can use the helmet, Doc," Shane said.

They were outside and standing beside the Harley. Shane had changed out of his health club uniform—khaki shorts and a polo shirt—and was now wearing jeans and a dark blue T-shirt that read "Cheers."

"Is this legal?" Adam asked.

"Sure is, unless we get caught."

Adam, practical and worried, tucked his necktie in between two buttons of his white shirt. "Aren't you gonna be cold?" he asked Shane.

"Hell, no," Shane said, with a leering grin. "With a big fella like you holding on to me to keep me warm?"

Adam hesitated but got on the back part of the seat. Jesse would have wisecracked that Adam's sudden erection was detectable a mile away. Shane kicked up the stand and started up the bike. Just before they hit the road, Adam heard Shane yell. "We have to make

one quick stop before I drop you off at the hospital. There's a little errand I've got to run."

* * *

Adam had been on a motorcycle once before, as a teenager in Georgia. He was thirteen and the bike had belonged to his older brother's friend, Craig Vogler, and Craig had let him ride it around the dirt field behind the junior high school gym building. Adam was frightened by the sudden energy at the twist of his wrists, his posture defensive and tense, his grip abruptly sweaty. He'd never asked Craig to try it again. Years later, Adam and Jesse had rented motorbikes in Sint Maarten, and again for a week they had spent in Provence, but Adam had found both experiences risky and unsafe. This should have been exhilarating for him—seated behind Shane on his bike, his arms wrapped around this wild and handsome young man's waist for balance, the early October weather crisp and clear, the morning sun bright and invigorating—but there was something about the loss of control that frightened him. He'd spent years—decades really—shaping his life into something he could almost manage and now he was worried that it could all end in a swift accident which he had no power to prevent. He supposed there was a clinical diagnosis for this too—there was a diagnosis for everything nowadays, a list of medical terms strung together that could describe any personality trait and its sub-characteristics—he spent his days seeking just the right string of words to appease patients and families and insurance companies. The ride was disconcerting; the speed incalculable. He tried to focus on objects as they approached and passed—the gas station, the strip mall, the drive-in lane of McDonald's. They were a daunting blur that forced him to press his head slightly into Shane's shoulder to hide the view, detecting a hint of sweat and the smell of youth in the flapping fabric of Shane's T-shirt.

Shane's "quick stop" and "little errand" was a twenty-minute ride in the wrong direction—to his grandfather's house—a two-room shotgun structure beneath a highway overpass. "Hey, Pop," Shane

said when he entered the house. "This is the doc. He's a friend from the gym."

Shane's grandfather was seated in a chair in front of the television. He was a thin man, about Shane's height, unshaved and dressed in loose-fitting sweat clothes. He gave Adam a vague look.

"Pop, you want some eggs and toast? Or oatmeal?"

The house was surprisingly tidy—magazines stacked on a coffee table, a neatly arranged bookcase of knickknacks and framed photographs, a crucifix hanging just out of sight. From where he stood, Adam could tell the kitchen was clean and orderly—pots hanging on hooks, another bookcase full of bowls and dishes, one shelf holding jars of raw honey with pieces of honeycomb inside. Beside the bookcase was a stack of hand-painted posters that Adam flipped through while Shane handed his grandfather a cane and helped him out of his chair. The posters were illustrations promoting high school events—football games, proms, a jazz band concert—and were expertly drawn, with repeated and superimposed imagery and photographs, large catchy color graphics, and bold, blocky type. When Shane began fixing his oatmeal for his grandfather, Adam went to the porch and used his cellphone to call the hospital. "I'll be a little while longer," he told Thea. "Another unexpected complication. Get Dr. Zeng to cover with Dr. Kestenbaum till I show up."

When he hung up Adam had two missed calls. On his voicemail, Jason, the gardener, mentioned that the dead leaves would be taken care of at the end of the month and the gutters would be checked and cleaned. Next came Jesse's shrieking voice blaming Adam for not taking the Porsche to get serviced. Adam's gut burned with anger and he felt it travel up to a forceful grip on the phone. Why had even he bothered blaming Jesse? Adam knew he would get that kind of response—that Jesse would only turn around and throw the blame right back at Adam. It was a vicious cycle they went through every day—every hour and every minute—taunt, blame, blame, taunt, blame.

"Hey, Doc, you think you could do me a favor?" Shane asked, sticking his head out the door and looking at Adam on the porch.

Adam hated that word. *Favor*. It implied good will and charity

and politeness when there should be a financial transaction—one party paying for the professional services of the other. Jesse was quick to point out Adam's stinginess and self-absorption whenever he resisted the notion of offering someone help. But Adam hadn't relied on favors to get a college degree. He had worked extra jobs and paid his own undergraduate tuition; he had taken out loans and enrolled in work-study programs to pay his way through medical school. A favor should be something he wanted to do for someone, not because they had asked him to do it.

"Can you take a look at my pop for a second? Check out this thing on his neck?"

Adam nodded and followed Shane inside. "Does he have a regular physician?" Adam asked.

"Not really," Shane said. "Last time we took him in, the doc said he was losing his mind, so my mom won't take him again. Said all the docs want to do is to soak the money out of the poor."

"That right?"

"Maybe not all of them, Doc. Just the ones with fancy cars that break down."

Adam caught Shane's grin and he realized it made him feel better: *wanted, needed, appreciated*. He asked the young man about his grandfather's age. At the table, Adam introduced himself again to Shane's grandfather and asked if he could check his pulse.

Shane's pop nodded but asked Shane, "Who's this guy?"

All at once Adam was thrown back to a thought of Jesse. Jesse's father had asked that same question last month when they had driven out to New Jersey for a visit—an early dinner to meet Jesse's sister's new boyfriend—and Jesse's father had looked at Adam and had no clue of who he was. After twenty-four years of living with his son, chatting with him on the phone, spending Passover and Hanukkah together, Adam was a blank to Mr. Berger. Parkinson's. Slow and steady and confusing.

Adam asked Shane what kind of medication his pop was taking.

Shane walked away from the table and brought back a few vials and Adam checked the dosages. "He live alone?" he asked Shane.

"I stay here some nights, on the couch. We both like the company."

"You should plan on the day he can't take care of himself," Adam said, and after he had said this, he felt instantly detached and professional and miserable, when he wanted to feel warm and reassuring. Maybe Jesse was right, after all. There *was* a stinginess about him, an incapacity for empathy. Maybe after too many years of doctoring, of being detached for professional reasons, he had lost the ability to show concern.

"This place's paid for," Shane said. "Except for taxes. I can usually cover that."

"What about your mom and dad?"

"What about them?" Shane asked, his face turning red and tense.

Adam knew that he had stepped over a line, a personal boundary Shane hadn't wanted him to cross. Again, he had meant it to be a caring and compassionate query, but the tone of his voice remained impassive and impersonal.

He felt Pop's forehead for signs of a fever, and asked the old man if he could look at the lump at the base of his throat, above and to the left of his clavicle. Adam touched it. It was a fleshy mass, moving easily. It didn't cause Shane's grandfather any pain.

"My guess is that it's not cancerous," Adam said. "Probably a small goiter. Thyroid problem. Your grandfather have insurance?"

"Nope, not really. Just what the government's got to give him."

Adam opened his cellphone and dialed the hospital, moving away from the table to get better reception by the window. He could hear the highway traffic above the house, the whosh-whosh-whosh of cars and trucks in both directions. When he reached Thea, he asked her to patch him through to Dr. Desai, who ran an outpatient clinic for senior citizens not far from the hospital. "Bob, can you see a friend for me next week?" Adam asked. "He may have a goiter—thyroid problem."

Adam asked Shane for his grandfather's name and made an appointment. "Don't give him a bill," Adam said. "Charge it to my cost code at the hospital."

"That legal?" Shane asked, while Adam was redirected back to Thea.

"Who's asking?"

"I don't want to get you into any trouble, Doc."

"Lots of paperwork in a hospital," Adam said. "Lots of things get lost."

Adam hated this part of being a doctor, being caught up in family issues, unable to resolve them with advice or prescriptions, unable to alter the forces of free will and the natural deterioration of the body and confronted with the bureaucracy and greediness of the profession. When he hung up his cellphone Adam went to the porch again and listened to the traffic on the highway lanes above the house. He wondered how helpful he really was as a psychiatrist, listening to issues and problems and confusions and fantasies but unable to cut and paste and rearrange it all in the proper order—or the order he felt was proper. Some days his regard for his profession could drop as low as his regard for Jesse. No, he was doing it again. None of this was Jesse's fault. Jesse had always been there for him, through thin, thick, fight after fight. Jesse was perfect and Adam was not, or at least that was what Jesse had tried to hammer home day after day.

When Shane had cleaned the dishes and his pop was seated in front of the television, Shane appeared on the porch and said, "I suppose I owe you something for this."

"You don't owe me anything," Adam said. "It was a favor, remember?"

As they were walking back to the motorcycle, Adam said, "Let's ride over to the bus station. It's a couple of blocks from here. I think I might find a friend's car there. He went into the city and I could drive myself back to the hospital."

* * *

Jesse's car was illegally parked in the bus depot parking lot. A ticket was shoved underneath the windshield-wiper blade.

"This it?" Shane asked Adam.

Jesse's car was a dark green Saab hatchback. Adam hated

the interior—a foreign and oval-shaped dashboard, orange-tan fake-looking leather seats. In his mind he heard Jesse's shrieking accusations when he had purchased the car, about the same time Adam had picked out his Porsche, "Just because I chose a practical workhorse of a car and not some kind of genital fantasy showpiece, doesn't mean that I should be punished because I want it to look different from everything else on the road."

Adam jangled his key chain in his grip, feeling the ridges of the keys to find the one for the Saab. He was thinking through an idea, an idea that was certain to have aftershocks.

"You don't mind taking me to the hospital do you?" he asked Shane. "If I needed you to?"

"I got some time," Shane said. "You're the boss, Doc."

"Stop calling me Doc. Makes me feel so old."

"Okay, Mr. O'Donnell."

"Adam. Call me Adam."

"Sure thing, Adam."

"How'd you like to earn some serious cash?"

"Depends. What do you consider serious?"

"Couple hundred enough?"

"Depends."

"See this car, here," Adam said and pointed to Jesse's dark green Saab. "You know it belongs to my friend Jesse."

"I've seen him once or twice with you at the gym. He's the chunky dude."

Adam laughed. "I'm not sure he would appreciate being called chunky. Body issues, you know."

Shane nodded. "Okay. Beefy guy."

Adam laughed again. "And you know Jesse's my roommate."

"Roommate?"

"You know we live together."

"He's your lover, ain't he?"

Lover, Adam thought, it was such a strong word. He choked on repeating it back to Shane. "That's right. He's my partner."

Other than about twenty parked cars, the lot was empty. No one in sight. "I am going to go stand over there, like I am waiting for the

bus," Adam said. "You are going to ride away, then drive back into the lot and slash this car's tires. Real deep."

Shane looked around the parking lot like he was casing the joint for a patrolling police car and Adam was setting him up for a fall. "That ain't legal, Adam."

"That's why I'm giving you serious cash for it."

Shane looked at the Saab. Then back at Adam.

"I thought you loved this guy."

"I do. Sometimes. Most times. Not always. Maybe not right now. Not this minute."

"What he do to you?"

"What *hasn't* he done to me."

Again, Shane looked at the car, then back at Adam.

"His life is too easy," Adam said. "He needs some new challenges. He'd do the same thing to me if he had thought of it first."

"What makes you think I'm that sort of guy?"

"What kind of guy?" Adam asked a bit too defensively.

"Kind of guy that slashes tires."

"Reverse psychology," Adam said, his pulse beating nervously. "I can play that game too, you know. Do it every day. Okay, maybe you're not that kind of guy."

"Is that what you take me for?"

"No," Adam said. "My mistake. I apologize. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to do this. It *is* illegal. And you're not that kind of guy. I just thought it might be a way for you to earn some quick cash. It's not like I'm asking you to murder him. Just damage the car a bit. Not really the car. The *tires*. I want Jesse to get off the bus and be really pissed when he finds his car ticketed and the tires slashed."

"That would get me."

"You'll do it?"

"Sure," Shane said. "Sure."

"I'll bail you out if you're caught. Promise."

"What makes you think I'll get caught?"

"You got a knife on you?"

"Course," Shane said. "What hood doesn't?"

* * *

The doctor's waiting room was full of new magazines, latest issues of *People, US, Entertainment Weekly, Time*, even the gossipy, grocery store tabloid *The Star*. Jesse hadn't realized that the doctor's office would be in the same building where he had taken Clay to see his internist. Clay had been the friend who had introduced Jesse to Adam twenty-four years ago at a party on the Upper West Side. Jesse had met Clay at a bar in the West Village his first month living in Manhattan. They'd gone back to Clay's apartment that night but had not clicked together sexually. Instead, they spent the evening drinking and listening to albums, comparing their favorite songs and performances. Clay had amassed a shelf of albums by female vocalists, recordings by Peggy Lee and Sarah Vaughan and his favorite, Ella Fitzgerald, and he had dipped the needle to the record and said to Jesse, "Listen to this…, this right here…, the way she sings this phrase….," as if he were a teacher, trying to educate a hopeless student. Jesse admitted that he liked the bouncier pop tunes he knew from his boyhood best, hits by Lesley Gore and Dusty Springfield and Dionne Warwick, songs he could sing along and dance to, but that he also held a special spot for Doris Day, those "Que Será, Será"-like ballads she could purr out the back of her throat.

A year later, the night before Thanksgiving, Clay took Jesse to a party on West Seventy-Seventh Street, where, from the twelfth-story apartment windows, it was possible to see the giant balloons being blown up for the next day's parade down Broadway. Adam had also been invited as a guest to that overcrowded party. Clay and Adam had a history as undergraduates together—Clay had cast Adam in a play he had directed while in college in Atlanta, and he had introduced Adam to Jesse as the worst performer ever to play Alfred P. Doolittle.

"Too many lines," Adam had said.

"Too much inflection," Clay had added.

Jesse and Adam had been thrown together while admiring Popeye's backside from the living-room window. That night, as Jesse stretched his hand out to introduce himself to Adam, Adam's eyes had done a swift up-and-down glance of Jesse's appearance.

It played through Jesse's mind now like a scene from a long-ago movie, the characters and sentiment familiar but distant, as if Jesse had forgotten what it was like to be handsome and attractive and desired, young and excited about meeting someone new, all the possibilities it could entail. In his memory, Jesse saw himself as he had been captured in a photograph, a few months after meeting Adam, on a beach towel, the weekend he and Adam had spent in the Hamptons. Adam had taken the photo and Jesse was smiling and tanned. His hair was layers of thick brown curls; his waist size that summer never reached twenty-nine inches. He was wearing a favorite swimsuit which he loved to wear to the beach—a black Speedo that seemed to be pinned between his pelvic bones. Jesse had felt like a B-movie seductress, sensual and alluring and gripping.

A light shame hung over Jesse as he glanced through *The Star*; his vanity embarrassing him. There was no medical reason for his appointment. It was a consultation for liposuction. *Liposculpture*, as this particular doctor liked to call it. Removing the fat from his waist that no amount of exercise or diet could get under control. On the wall of the waiting room was a framed poster of an art exhibition of Egyptian antiquities, the centerpiece a deep, luscious profile of Queen Nefertiti. Jesse nervously averted his eyes from the magazine to the poster—studying the sloping nose, the high forehead, the tight, thin neckline. What if Clay had lived—would he have considered something like this—*liposculpture*? Would he have needed a hair transplant? Back waxing and electrolysis? Dental bleaching? Would he and Jesse even recognize each other?

Jesse had spent the last few months returning to the city for one consultation after the next, gathering information on how he might look better and more desirable, but unable to make the next move—calculating the costs and decisions and repercussions—a down payment for a new apartment in the city or liposuction? A hair transplant or a Mediterranean cruise? He had not told Adam anything of these appointments, and Jesse's emptiness of missing Clay continued—Clay, beautiful Clay, Clay with the green eyes and spiky hair, who could get any guy to drop his pants simply by entering a room—Clay, full of gossip and opinions and anecdotes

and tales of his wild, adventurous, *très gai* life. Jesse missed not being able to call Clay to confide and daily deconstruct the trivial details and desires of their lives. He missed Clay's throaty laugh, the deep sigh of breath before he would say to Jesse, "You'll never guess what I did last night…."

Clay's seropositive diagnosis played melodramatically through Jesse's memory—the tearful phone call of disclosure, the scramble to find specialists, the overnight blood transfusions in the hospital, the swift decline into home care and nurses. For a brief, panicky moment, Jesse believed that this had been the exact waiting room where Clay's lesions had been diagnosed as Kaposi's sarcoma. He wondered if this might even be the same physician—that this doctor had survived all his young, dying, gay AIDS patients and reinvented his career to treat those aging survivors hoping to hold on to their youth.

In the examination room Jesse answered the questions about his weight and height and waist size from a young nurse with bright white teeth, dark eyes, and a Spanish accent, who checked his pulse and breathing and asked more questions about his medical history and current medications. ("Only Ambien to keep my partner's snoring from bothering me," he joked, "and Xanax to keep me from killing him.")

He wanted to tell her that he was ashamed of every pound he had ever weighed over two-hundred. He was continually fretting about this extra baggage, looking at calorie counts on the backs of soda bottles, trying weight-reducing bars, and experimenting with juices or fruits that might jump-start his metabolism. It was all a part of his philosophy to look for new ways to improve himself—meditation, yoga postures, voice lessons, pedicures, back waxes. Of course, he seldom persevered in any of these directions for long, but something of his determination to succeed should be factored into his character, shouldn't it? Shouldn't his *desire* to be thinner and better looking than he really was be seen as important as the hefty ring of flesh around his waist?

When the nurse left, Jesse removed his sweater and shirt as the nurse had told him to. He hung them on the hangers behind

the door. Embarrassed and feeling huge, he sat on the edge of the examination table, the thin paper crinkling beneath his legs and palms. Doctor visits were a humbling experience for him; he disliked being cast into the role of an uneducated, unhappy, or imperfect patient. Jesse always believed that Adam pushed this paradigm—a doctor's power displacement and ego trip—from his hospital rounds and patients' sessions and into the complexities of their personal relationship. Jesse was forever trying to shift this imbalance and, for a moment, he fantasized about walking through the door of their house, tossing his jacket on the coat rack, and saying, "Hi, honey, I feel fabulous today," and waiting for Adam to notice the newly missing weight, aghast at the lack of distance once again between Jesse's pelvic bones.

The doctor was a disappointment. Jesse hoped he would be a tall and tanned dreamboat he could flirt with. Instead, he was rewarded with a short, balding man with heavy eyebrows and hairy wrists. But Dr. Mylett had a soft, pleasant manner—not at all like the brusque, too-busy Upper East Side specialist Jesse thought he was meeting. Using photographs of the torso of an overweight man not too dissimilar to Jesse, Dr. Mylett explained the procedure of removing fat—local anesthesia, incisions, a suction rod, and a vacuum. Then the doctor examined Jesse's chest and waist, drew a few lines on Jesse's flesh with a black inky marker, and repeated the details of the procedure, using another photograph of what similar post-operative results Jesse could expect. "Once the fat is removed, it doesn't come back in that area," Dr. Mylett said. "If you gain weight, your body will increase proportionally."

"How painful is this?" Jesse asked. Pain was out of the question. If he was going to throw away a chunk of money, Jesse wanted to know it wasn't going to hurt.

"You may feel pressure or movement during the procedure," the doctor said. "But not actual pain. No different than going to the dentist."

Jesse rolled his eyes. Dentist visits were excruciating, particularly his last one, for a root canal of a back molar. "And afterwards?" he asked.

"They'll be some slight discomfort, more like you've just done a thousand sit-ups. You'll be able to go home the same day. I'd wait a few days before doing any light exercising. And I'd recommend wearing an abdominal binder—a compression girdle—to reduce the swelling for the first few weeks."

A girdle? Swelling? He couldn't help thinking of Jane Russell and Ann-Margret, those big-busted broads in ribboned corsets and black stockings, singing and dancing and flirting with handsome men. "So no taking my shirt off right away at the gym?" Jesse tried to joke.

"Not right away," Dr. Mylett said. "The stomach will be soft, not toned, unless those muscles are strong and developed already."

"Hardly," Jesse laughed. "But my jaw muscles are hard as rocks."

* * *

They stopped for breakfast. Adam was famished, the edges of a hunger headache changing his mood; he didn't want to walk right into his office and start seeing patients on an empty stomach. And he wanted to bond better with Shane.

At a diner, Adam ordered wheat toast, then decided on a three-egg omelet, changed the toast order to a blueberry muffin, and added side orders of hash browns and bacon, thinking, what the hell, the morning had been shot already, he might as well eat as much as he could now, not knowing when he might have a break for lunch.

Shane had ordered only coffee, until Adam told him, "It's on me," and he ordered a stack of pancakes.

"I always crave carbs when the weather starts to change," Shane said. "Must be that idea that winter is coming round, though it could be that my coach always made us train hard and eat heavy during the season."

While Adam ate he asked Shane about his football career: What position had he played? (Offense: Wing Receiver. "'Cause I got the speed in me.") What was his favorite play? ("Touchdown, you fool.")

Who was his favorite professional team and favorite player? ("Brett Favre, but my heart's with the Steelers. Haven't you ever been to the Starting Line in Hellertown to watch the game?") Adam wasn't listening too closely to Shane's answers; instead, he was both repulsed by and enjoying the salty crunch of bacon in his mouth. He hadn't had bacon in years—somehow he had always associated bacon at breakfast with his father's early death from a heart attack, brought on from years of Adam's mother serving it along with her steak-and-potatoes combination at dinnertime and further clogging his father's arteries. Jesse usually served bacon to their guests at Sunday brunch—where there was also quiche and bagels and cream cheese and lox. Adam always found it ironic that they entertained their guests with these high-fat, high-calorie, high-cholesterol meals while Adam only ate wheat toast without butter and Jesse ate nothing at all if he were on a diet—that is, Jesse ate nothing until the guests left and then he picked at the leftovers while cleaning up.

"I can get you into a pool," Shane said. "Run bets for you. Want to place anything, let me know."

Adam didn't understand the dynamics of betting odds, hadn't any kind of understanding of point spreads or straight bets or money lines or how to determine what team was the odds-on favorite. He'd avoided such pools that the hospital staff circulated and posted, because he refused to ask someone to decode the system for him. He'd rarely even watched a football game on television since leaving the South shortly after high school, and he'd only gone to the games in high school because of his friends. In fact, he was no kind of a gambler at all. The one trip to Vegas he had taken with Jesse they had avoided the casinos altogether, more interested in exploring the enormous Caesar's Palace shopping mall and getting tickets to a Cirque du Soleil show.

But Adam had no desire to come off as an elitist disinterested in sports, so he said, "Place a bet for me. A hundred on your favorite."

"That's a lot of pressure on me, Doc," Shane said, smiling. "I mean, Adam."

"I'm sure you can handle it. And keep half for yourself if you pick a winner."

"I bet we could do business real good together," Shane said. "We could make this a regular gig, if you want."

The idea drifted through Adam's imagination—a regular, ongoing thing with Shane that might develop into another regular, ongoing thing. He suddenly saw the shape of the future—betting, winning, sex, love, more money, and life without Jesse. "Let's see if you bring me a winning bet, first," the practical side of him answered. He was pleased that he hadn't been completely snowed under by the younger man and his own imagination. He had re-established the balance between them, especially since Adam had emptied the cash out of his wallet to pay for the tire slashing, and was now regretting it. Not the loss of money. The venom that Jesse was sure to unleash. Who else would have done such a thing to Jesse's car but Adam? It was sure to provoke something else between them. Jesse would never forgive him; he would use the tire slashing to taunt Adam more and more and more. But after all these years the one thing that Adam had learned about his life with Jesse was that it was easier for them to fight with each other than to display their affections. They would never physically harm each other. It was a psychological battle, all emotional. And at the heart of the crime, or prank, really, Adam knew Jesse would be secretly flattered that Adam was so incensed, so full of hatred for Jesse, that he had slashed his partner's tires. It showed he really, truly, absolutely cared. Adam wondered how this behavior could be diagnosed from both perspectives. *Lethal romance*, he thought. *Or better: toxic love.*

"Sounds like a smart plan, Adam," Shane said. "Gotta go visit the head."

Adam watched Shane's punting stride when the young man left the table. He wondered what it would take to get Shane in the sack—wondered how much it would cost financially—and emotionally. He hated the notion that everything had its price—it wasn't that he couldn't afford Shane—or didn't want to pay such a high price to get him into bed—Adam only wanted the fee to be worthwhile—that somewhere within this young man's psyche Shane might find Adam as attractive as Adam was finding him. Again he heard Jesse's shrieking laughter in his mind: "You are such a fool.

That straight boy'll bleed you dry before he *wants* to jump into bed with you."

After the waitress removed their plates, Adam worked on the child's puzzle on the placemat—a state by state quiz of flowers and birds. Kentucky: Goldenrod and Cardinal. New York: Rose and Bluebird. Pennsylvania: Mountain Laurel and Ruffed Grouse (both tough ones, but familiar to him since many of his adolescent patients always knew these even before he did). Stuck on the state bird of Alabama, he noticed Shane had not returned to the table. He took the bill and paid the cashier with his credit card. Shane was outside in the parking lot, talking to a bearded fellow wearing a baseball cap and standing beside a black van.

"Hey, Doc, this is my friend Lou," Shane said, when Adam approached the two men. "I got Lou a good price on a new sound system for his van. Tell Doc how great it is."

Lou gave Adam a nervous look and shuffled a foot, as if Adam might be an undercover cop. "Awesome," he said. "Got me a deal on a satellite radio subscription too. I can listen to the Dublin bands while I drive."

"Whaddya say, Doc? I could get you one for your Porsche," Shane said. Then, to Lou, he added, "The doc here drives a Carrera convertible. Sweet thing, he won't even let me touch it."

"Hell, if I had a Porsche it would never leave my garage," Lou answered with a laugh. "'Fraid it would get scratched. And I wouldn't let you touch it either, you fool."

"Doc's is metallic silver," Shane said. "Can you imagine listening to Zeppelin in that on River Road with the top down?"

Lou laughed again. "Get back to you on the iPod, dude," he said to Shane, patting him on the back. "Nice meeting you, Doc."

Lou headed toward the entrance of the diner. Adam tucked his tie into his shirt, readying himself for the motorcycle ride.

"Whaddya say, Doc? You got a few minutes? We can make a quick stop at my buddy's and I can show you a real sweet system. On the way to the hospital. Guarantee it. Ten minutes, top."

Adam looked at his watch. He was waffling. He had patients to see. Charts to check. Reports to file. The day was stretching ahead of

him long and impossible. He only wanted to escape it, spend some time with a young man who clearly wanted to spend more time with him. Even if it meant spending money.

"Ten minutes," Adam said. "And no pressure if I don't like it."

* * *

Twenty-four years. Twenty-four years there had been no roadmap to follow. No self-help book available on how to live with another gay man. No role model for what to want out of a relationship, what to expect and what to settle for. All of it learned by experience. By passionate kisses, angry tears, and bitter fights. It was no wonder they were both tired of it. Wanted a change. (In fact, they had both reached this point many times before.) No one explained how to fall in love with a man or how to live with a stubborn one. Life wasn't a Hollywood drama or a Broadway musical (or even, in Jesse's mind, a smoky, dimly lit cabaret).

Adam was raised Baptist and Jesse was from a Jewish family, though this was never an issue between them. Adam was a Southern boy, born and bred in the suburbs of Georgia. Jesse was a Jersey boy with a boyhood full of camps, Hebrew school, and boarding schools. At his bar mitzvah Jesse had everyone sing and dance to Broadway show tunes. They were both of the generation of gay men who came of age post-Stonewall; the days of rioting part of their chronology but learned in retrospect—Adam was fourteen the year of the Stonewall uprising, more conscious of earning good grades than of where gay men were convening in Manhattan and what they were fighting for. At the time, Jesse was saddened by the death of Judy Garland; it would be years before he would hear the theory that grief could have spurred a revolution. (*Judy Garland caused a riot?* So there *are* others like me. I'm not the only boy trying to get a roadmap to Oz.)

In their boyhoods, both had witnessed change: Kennedy's death, the summer of love and Woodstock, an astronaut on the moon, Watergate and Nixon's resignation. Their twenty-four years together had encompassed more change: the fall of the Berlin wall, Clinton's

scandals, the destruction of the World Trade towers. Technology had altered their lives and lifestyles. Video machines and stores that rented movies. Record albums replaced by smaller CDs. Faxes which worked on radio frequencies. Phone trees replaced by e-mail. Laptops with DVD players. Sex lines replaced by Web sites and chat rooms.

When they had first started dating homosexuality was no longer considered a mental disease, but then there was GRID and faltering immune systems, then AIDS and its widening panic and fear, with someone testing positive or someone else suddenly in the hospital or another friend near death and planning his own memorial. They had gone to be tested together (each was negative). Jesse had volunteered as a buddy; Adam had offered pro bono group sessions at the community center. They had marched with ACT UP, walked the AIDS Walk, and cheered the Pride parades. Outings and demonstrations led to cocktail prescriptions and longer life expectancy. Ellen came out, lesbians were proclaimed chic, and *Will and Grace* became mainstream. Everywhere there were gay history books and gay film festivals and gay newspapers and gay resorts.

No wonder the definitions of themselves and their relationship kept changing. Boyfriend. Lover. Partner. It was all give and take. Assimilation and compromise. Nothing unconditional. Meanings shifting with time. Significant Other. Domestic partner. Civil union. Husband and Husband. *Ball and chain.*

Right up front they had issues of money and monogamy. Jesse wanted to be wooed and romanced and seduced, payback for all those elaborate meals he cooked in his tiny studio for Adam; Adam expected Jesse to pay for his extravagant desserts because he was always on a budget. Adam had been friends with gay men who vocally expressed their admiration of other men. Jesse found it rude to have a date talk about how beautiful someone *else* was. Jesse wanted to wear rings, to display their commitment to each other. Adam didn't want to have to explain himself to his staff or patients. But there were the moments when they were together in a darkened theater, watching a movie or a play, when Adam would reach out and hold Jesse's hand, a connection of tenderness and affection

which would play over and over through Jesse's consciousness. *He loves me. He wants me. He accepts me for who I am.*

After twenty-four years together that's all either of them still wanted. Intimacy. Or at least the notion that it survived between them.

At first their fights were playful jousts, post-coital opinions on who was the better singer, better actor, and better entertainer—Garland or Minnelli? Streisand or Midler? Kelly or Astaire? Adam waffled, his choice depending on a specific song or movie or performance; Jesse scored it Garland, tie, Minnelli. Barbra, Barbra, Bette. "Judy was effortless," Jesse explained, "but Liza sells it. No one sings or acts like Babs, but Bette lets you feel so involved." They both preferred Gene Kelly over Fred Astaire.

Soon there were breakfast conversations about boxers or briefs and dinner discussions about show tunes eclipsing poor cuisine. Adam was willing to wait for discounted tickets to see a new hit Broadway show; Jesse was too impatient, he wanted to call friends for connections to buy expensive, reserved house seats. They had no problem articulating their wants and don'ts. (Jesse wanted to try a new restaurant in the East Village. Adam didn't want to go to a gay resort in Palm Springs, even with a discounted rate.)

Adam loved to snow Jesse under with his high-brow academic perspectives. Once, at a dinner party, Adam said, "Sure, Bruce Weber had a tremendous cultural impact with those billboards, but Mapplethorpe was the true genius. He was willing to confront society's taboos through a highly passive but startling medium."

Jesse joked that Adam was being pretentious, that he obviously liked looking at a nude black man's big cock more than a suggestive white cotton bulge. It was a polite dig, but it also wasn't.

"You're making me come off very shallow," Adam said, after their guests had left. "I don't think about sex all the time."

"Of course not dear. You're never thinking about it at all *with me*."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I can be as subtle and complex as you can be. I don't just read *People* magazine, you know."

"You picked this up from Elizabeth Taylor's bio?" Adam said.

"She's a perfect role model," Jesse answered. "No man could ever please her."

According to both, it was and wasn't all about sex.

They were both conservative, reticent, and old-fashioned, passive-aggressive Tops wishing they would be thrown onto the bed as Bottoms. Neither could be selfless in bed. It was difficult for Adam to accept pleasure. It was hard for Jesse to offer anything back.

Jesse had never been sexually adventurous. He had no desire to be tied up, pissed on, or to rim a guy's asshole. (Fisting was incomprehensible.) He was the guy in the steam room who always left without scoring, not because he was unwilling, but because he preferred "to know a little something about the guy whose mouth was closing in on my dick." In fact, Jesse could become depressed after an anonymous trick or a one-night stand. As if he hadn't been good enough in the sack to want to be seen a second time, as if he had failed to become someone special. And if a guy hadn't wanted to become Jesse's lover, why didn't he want Jesse to be his new best friend?

Adam thought porn movies were best watched alone. He could be easily stimulated by images of body parts—biceps, hairy chests, a fleshy cock. But he had no desire for dirty talk or muscle worship, and had been surprised a few years back when he was approached at a party by a man who wanted him to strip and pose. He had told his admirer he was offended at the suggestion; he didn't appreciate being reduced to the idea of a sexual object, even though he was willing to objectify any other man himself.

They had both lived in Manhattan for two years before they met. Clay had taken Adam to the X-rated movie houses on Times Square. Jesse had gone with Clay to the Rambles and the piers, to see what those scenes were all about. Jesse had smoked pot three or four times. Adam had once nixed the offer of half a Quaalude. Neither of them had ever tried cocaine.

Adam was Jesse's seventh boyfriend but first lover. The boyfriends had never really been boyfriends but guys Jesse had

scored with and went out with a second or third time. Before Adam, Jesse had gone out on a string of dates with older men—a Wall Street headhunter, a struggling composer, and an insurance analyst. The analyst was the most attractive man Jesse had ever slept with, but also the most boring and self-involved. ("I couldn't even get an opinion in about Diana Ross! All he wanted to do was talk about himself!")

Adam's second relationship had been with Clay. A junior in college, Clay was already something of a sexual butterfly, but for Adam, two years younger, he was a friend, a refuge, someone to listen to and open up with. Clay wanted to move to New York, escape the South, and become a Broadway director. Adam listened to Clay's gossip about the size of a frat boy's dick or a Latin professor's fetish. Adam had never had this sort of close friend, someone who confided in him. He told Clay he thought he would be a big success in New York. Clay told Adam how sexy he was, how much he wanted him, how he had never wanted anyone else the way he wanted Adam. (Some of this was just talk, gay boys being gay boys, heightening the sexual chemistry, but Clay once told Jesse that Adam was one of the best five men who had fucked him in his life, a rating that failed to impress Jesse.)

Clay soon moved on to another guy after he and Adam had bedded a few more times, but for the first time in his life, Adam was comfortable with who he was. When Clay moved to New York, he and Adam kept in touch with letters and phone calls. Adam had a series of minor boyfriends, but Clay was the reason why Adam chose to go to medical school in Manhattan.

Jesse had always been jealous and suspicious of Adam's sexual history with Clay; at times he thought they were still a little too close for comfort. Adam resented Jesse's tell-all gossiping with Clay, something that Clay no longer did with Adam because of Jesse. Sometimes it made Adam feel like the third person in a relationship. Clay and Jesse both excluded Adam from Clay's debilitating decline—Jesse was the one who would take Clay to the doctor, not Adam. Jesse was the one who would stay over to change the IV, not Adam. Clay never told Jesse that Adam had paid for Clay's last

three months of rent. When Clay died, Adam thought he and Jesse would go their separate ways. Instead, they loved and hated each other more. It was a problematic adjustment, transforming them into something more complex.

* * *

Shane's buddy, Hank, worked out of a basement room at Psycho Tattoo on Route 412. Adam had never been inside the old ranch-style house which had been converted into commercial use. He had often heard of the place from police reports and parent conferences. This wasn't one of the suburban boutique studios with soft lighting and incense that did inking and piercings. City and county warnings prepared him for what he might expect to find behind the menacing painted façade of a large human skull drawn and placed between the words "Psycho" and "Tattoo." The parking lot of Psycho Tattoo was a well-known after-school teen hangout, young boys and girls smoking and drinking beside their parents' trucks and SUVs, the environment full of hormonal swaggers, embraces, dares, and sudden fights. Adam had seen as patients several teenagers whose parents had forbidden them to hang out outside Psycho Tattoo and often had nothing to do with what went on inside the shop. He'd sat through sessions full of teary-eyed disappointment and malicious rage. Outside his office, in the corridor of the hospital, one mother had confronted him, worried that her son would end up "spoiled for life by that place." A father had complained bitterly to the town council that the establishment was selling "drug-taking paraphernalia." Preachers and school officials condemned the place, but the kids always defended the parking lot as the one spot in town where they could be who they wanted to be. Adam should have expected that this would be where Shane would lead him—the guy was barely out of high school himself. Shane was every parent's nightmare—a kid trafficking in stolen property, hot merchandise, and illegal goods. And this was exactly why Adam was now finding him so attractive.

Shane parked the motorcycle in the back lot, mostly empty except for a few trucks and other bikes—it was too early for the kids

to start gathering—most would be in school, or perhaps skipping classes to roam one of the malls.

"Better not," Adam said, as Shane headed toward a back door.

"What you mean, Doc?"

"Front door," Adam said. "I should go in through the front door."

Adam arched his eyebrows and titled his head, indicating that he knew more about the place than he wanted to divulge to Shane, that Shane must know that Psycho Tattoo was often under surveillance.

"Sure thing, Doc," Shane said. "You'd be real hot with a tattoo."

The compliment eased Adam's anxiety. He followed Shane around the corner of the building. Inside the front room, Shane tapped knuckles with a guy behind a counter, a tall man with a graying ponytail wearing a tank top, his lean arms banded with colorful tattoos.

"Pretending you're a paying customer?" the guy said to Shane, "Or do I finally get a chance to ink that pretty skin of yours?"

"Not yet, dude," Shane said. "Keep salivating." The two men crunched knuckles again and Shane said, "Gabe, this is my pal, Adam. Wanted to check out the tattoos first while we were here."

"How ya doin', Adam?" Gabe said. "Hit me with any questions ya got."

Adam nodded. He lifted his eyes above Gabe's head to the drawings pinned to wall behind the counter, all variations and embellishments of the ominous skull logo. A damp chill hung over the room, sharpening the faint stink of mold. On the counter were notebooks of drawings and photographs. In one of them, Adam found pages displaying eagles and bears and wildcats with wide-spread wings or growling snarls. Beneath his feet, the plywood floor shifted as he transferred his body weight from one leg to the other and reached for another notebook, this one of tattooed arm bands—threads of barbed wire or leaping flames or Celtic weaves and chains. Adam had fantasized about getting a tattoo, something that could make him look more masculine and seductive, or better yet, something that might repel and repulse Jesse entirely out of his

life. Donnie had an elaborate tattoo of a scorpion on his left shoulder and was forever talking about getting another one on his chest or forearm. This must be where Donnie came to look at drawings and designs.

Gabe ignored Adam, putting photographs into a notebook. Adam moved down the counter, skipping the series of notebooks named "Dragons" and "Mythical Beasts." He opened a notebook labeled "Arms" and got a quick erection from a sequence of photographs of tattooed biceps. He was thankful when Shane interrupted his concentration by saying, "Adam works out at the gym with Big Donnie."

"Must be hard to keep up with that dude," Gabe said.

Adam nodded. Lowering the pitch of his voice and hoping he sounded more butch, he said, "Works my butt off. Just what I need."

Gabe and Shane laughed. There was a bit of nervous tension in the air—both men were now looking at Adam flip through a notebook. Adam let the uneasiness linger, playing out a scenario in his mind where he was an undercover agent determined to save Shane from a life of heinous corruption. He would be rewarded with the young man's undivided devotion and sexual attention.

In his pocket, the simultaneous vibration of Adam's pager and his ringing cellphone interrupted him. He moved away from the counter and flipped open the cellphone, nodding his apologies to Gabe. It was Thea, tracking him down about the changed dosage of a patient's medication. Adam moved toward the front door and spoke quietly to the nurse, ironically reconfirming the treatment he had prescribed for a rebellious young man who had most likely tortured his parents with visits to this very room. At the end of the conversation, Adam said, "I'm still tied up with some personal issues. I'll be in as soon as I can."

He hung up and apologized again to Gabe. Shane said, "Adam here's a doc at the hospital. Helps out a lot of fucked-up dudes."

Gabe tapped a cigarette on the counter and nodded—he'd already dismissed Adam as a visitor and not a potential customer, and the phone call seemed to ease the possibility that Adam might

not be one of the authorities intent on cracking down on the business.

"Doc here's in a bit of rush," Shane said. "He's thinking about a new sound system for his ride."

"Best thing there is, if you got lots of driving to do," Gabe said.

Adam closed the notebook of tattoos and returned it to the counter shelf. He followed Shane behind a beaded curtain and into a hallway where there were glass cases of ceramic pipes and hookahs and bongs. On one side of the hallway was a closed door with a sign with bright red letters that said "ADULTS ONLY." Adam knew, from his conversations with parents and patients, it led into a room of bins with vintage and hardcore pornography—old issues of *Hustler* and *Penthouse* and *Playboy* and *Jugs*, which now seemed harmless compared to what could be downloaded on the Internet.

The hallway led to another room that must have been the original kitchen of the house, now set up with various arrangements of chairs and tables and stools where Gabe, or one of the various female assistants who worked during the evenings or on the weekend, inked tattoos or performed body piercings.

Shane opened a door and descended a flight of stairs into the basement. Adam grew nervous as he followed—there was no way he could explain his actions if the place was suddenly raided—police busting in to confiscate stolen goods or illicit drugs. Shane flipped on a light switch and said, "Hank must be out."

Overhead were pipes and ducts. Televisions, computers, stereo equipment and electronic parts were boxed or neatly stacked and arranged and labeled on metal shelving and long tables. The detailed organization eased Adam's suspicion that these goods might have "fallen off the back of a truck" or was merchandise being "discontinued by the factory." Shane led him to a shelf of radio systems and explained how it would work in Adam's car.

"Look's like you've got a good thing going on down here," Adam said. His tension, the damp basement, the dark concrete walls, the privacy with Shane made Adam want to embrace and kiss the young man. He imagined them groping each other, their

passion wrestling them into a furious series of quick releases. He could forego the charges of purchasing stolen goods if he could explain it away as nothing more than a sexual pick-up. That excuse would do nothing to help his professional character, of course, but it was what Adam desired more than any radio system with a Celtic music channel. Just a brief moment of intimacy. Of connecting with a desire as strong as his own.

Adam was not able to make the first move, and he knew that Shane would never instigate that kind of behavior unless he had revealed a price list first. And right now Shane was all business. "I can install it for you, too," Shane said. "Activate any subscription you want."

"Any kind of warranty?" Adam asked. "If it doesn't work."

"Full refund if you're not satisfied."

"Serial numbers scratched out?" Adam asked.

"No way, Doc. This is all legit. Hank's got a business license and everything. Rent down here is real cheap. You're not paying overhead for fancy digs and Sunday coupons."

"And your cut?"

"Commission," Shane said. "For getting customers here."

Adam was ready to buy, but as a tactic he stalled, aching for Shane to offer a blow job or jerk off session as part of the deal. He glanced around the basement at the other shelves. "Could even do a package deal for you," Shane pressed. "Digital TV. Plasma screen."

There was a desk in a corner of the basement. Above it were drawings—designs of tattoos—the blocky style similar to the graphic posters Adam had noticed at Shane's grandfather's house.

"You never told me you were an artist, too," Adam said.

"Not much to it," Shane said. "Computer helps."

"You've got a good eye. Where did you learn to do this?"

"Mom sent me to an art class at the Y when I was a kid."

"A kid?"

"Twelve."

"That's all?"

"Sure."

"Pretty good for a twelve-year-old kid."

"I was sixteen. Seventeen when I did these."

Adam calculated that this might have only been a couple of years ago. The art certainly made Shane more interesting to him—and more attractive. Maybe he could be a mentor, an inspiration, a guide, a Svengali to lift Shane up out of the dark side and into becoming a renowned artist. Maybe this was the way to Shane's heart—and cock. *Gratitude.*

"I could throw in a discount on a tattoo upstairs."

"Let's settle on somethig for the car," Adam said.

"You're getting yourself a great deal, Doc," Shane said, pleased that a deal was emerging. "This is just the beginning. I can feel it. I know you'll be coming back for a lot more of what I've got for you."

* * *

After his doctor's appointment, Jesse walked down Third Avenue to Bloomingdale's. He hadn't dismissed the idea of liposculpture, but he hadn't embraced the prospect of surgery either. At the back of his mind was the fact that he wanted to love himself the way he was—flaws and all—and, most of all, he wanted someone else to love him for those exact same imperfections. Would he really feel better about himself if he were thinner? Had more hair? Had a perfect complexion or a perfect smile? Couldn't he find himself a new lover—or a boyfriend or a date or a trick—on the sheer force and dynamics of his personality and not on looks?

"*Not a chance*," he heard Adam's throaty laugh mock him.

At a crosswalk, waiting for the light to change, he dialed his cellphone to reach Adam at his hospital office. Jesse worked his way out of the voicemail system until he reached Thea, Adam's hard-toned nurse, and asked her to page him. "Not in yet, hon," she said, as if she were a waitress cracking gum at the corner of her mouth.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he ain't here. AWOL. Some kind of personal crisis."

Jesse thanked her and said he would track Adam down on his

cellphone. Jesse missed the change of lights, a panicky thought of Adam hurt or injured or lying unconscious beside the side of the road sweeping over him. He held a bloody, lifeless image in his mind until it fed a sweet thrill of release and freedom. He guiltily smiled. He held this pleasure secretly and tightly as he dialed Adam's cellphone number and crossed the street. When the call jumped into voicemail, Jesse's voice was soft and calm. "Adam, honey bee, I just spoke to Thea and she said you weren't in yet. Are you all right? Anything wrong? Call me as soon as you get this."

By the time he reached Bloomingdale's, Jesse's concern about Adam had evaporated. Adam was only posturing, as he always did. He was probably trying to use this stalling tactic to get an end-of-the-year bonus or raise. Only last week he had complained that his department budget was due and it meant him having to work extra hours to complete it.

In the ground-floor men's department, Jesse sorted through shelves of sweaters, looking for the wider cuts which could camouflage his waistline and trying to ignore Adam's mental taunts that Jesse should learn how to *continue* with a diet and not just start one. If Jesse did a rigorous diet program, kept to it, and went back to seeing his personal trainer—maybe he *could* resculpt his body without liposculpture. That would show Adam. Maybe he could out-Adam Adam, get down to *seven* percent body fat and steal Adam's personal trainer from him. Big Donnie always adored Jesse's jokes. He knew he could do it if he wanted. *If* he wanted.

A maroon crew-neck sweater held Jesse's interest for a few minutes. He debated whether he wanted to buy it and carry a shopping bag for the rest of the day. He decided he would do a little more shopping first. He headed toward the escalator, remembering he needed wine glasses to replace the ones Adam had purposely knocked off the end table beside the bed (and which Jesse had dutifully mopped away and vacuumed up with a seething resentment that had boiled over into a fight).

On the escalator to the housewares department another memory returned: His first year in the city Jesse had called Clay and asked where the best place in Manhattan was to meet a guy. "The

toilets at Bloomie's," Clay said, without hesitation. "I met a guy there last week who had a terrace overlooking Central Park."

Clay had made it sound like a romantic encounter—the view of the skyline, classical music playing in the background, a line of coke to alleviate any uneasiness. The following weekend Jesse had staked out the Bloomingdale's toilet on the fourth floor. It was Christmas season and the store was crowded. Jesse had tried not to look too suspicious or too full of intent as he wandered back and forth in front of the Christmas ornaments, his eyes pinned toward the hallway which led to the restrooms. When he noticed a good-looking man dressed in an expensive leather jacket headed toward the men's bathroom, Jesse followed him inside and stood beside him at the adjacent urinal. His heart beat so loudly in his ears that he couldn't urinate. Jesse stood at the urinal nervously flicking his hand at his crotch, hoping to catch the man's attention. Jesse was never good at these sorts of hook-ups—he wanted to flirt and chat and show off his wit, not try to lower the tone of his voice to a sexy whisper and pretend he was a porn star looking for a fast trick. The man had left without even a passing glance at Jesse, and Jesse, in his nervousness, had darted his glance around the restroom. A tall, dark-haired man with sleepy eyes stared at him, trying to catch his attention.

Their eyes met but Jesse flicked his gaze away and zippered up, but not without looking back again at the dark-haired sleepy-eyed man. Jesse nervously left the restroom, but he wasn't ready to give up on the possibility of a hook-up. He resumed his sentry post at the shelves of holiday ornaments. He was surprised when the sleepy-eyed giant circled him, pretending to study the figurines inside a crèche. The man approached Jesse and whispered, "How about it? Want to go somewhere?"

Jesse looked up, right into the sleepy-eyed man's dark pupils, and saw something that made him uncomfortable. His body shook and he tossed his head back and forth—hoping it meant "no"—and he fled toward the escalators and the street. Years later in Pennsylvania, while waiting in the check-out line at the grocery store, Jesse had picked up one of those scandalous Hollywood tabloids and flipped

through the pages. Beside the story of a serial killer's capture somewhere in the mid-west, was a picture of a sleepy-eyed man Jesse was certain had been his Bloomingdale's encounter. He had gone dizzy, as though he was about to faint, but later, rereading the article at home and looking harder at the photograph, Jesse was again certain about it. A dark depression hung over him for almost a week: he was unable to confide in Adam about his near-death encounter, and he no longer had a close friend like Clay to discuss it with. And he no more wanted to tell Adam about his potential hook-up with a serial killer as he wanted to hear about Adam's continual infatuation with Big Donnie.

In the housewares department, Jesse headed toward the larger appliances. He wondered if Bloomingdale's sold the latest state-of-the-art outdoor grills and might be running an off-season sale. He had never upgraded the small grill he had bought when he and Adam had moved into the house on Ingham Road. If they wanted to continue to throw their expensive outdoor soirees, Jesse was going to need a new grill sooner than later.

Instinctively, Jesse dialed Adam's office number again, thinking he would ask Adam's opinion about grills. He hung up as soon as he was dumped into voicemail, remembering Thea's remark about Adam's no-show at the hospital. A wave of fear rushed through his mind: What if something had happened to Adam? What would he do? *Really?*

As he put the cellphone in his pocket, a soft voice startled Jesse. "Would you like to try an omelet, sir?" Jesse was standing right beside a demonstration counter where a young man was cooking with a frying pan.

"This is the new Dream Coat skillet," the young man said. "It's no-stick and made without any plastic coatings. You'll never cook with anything else after you've tried this."

Jesse ate a tiny square cut of omelet that was pierced by a toothpick. "Hmmm," he said, nodding at the young man. "The spices are divine." The young man had dirty blond hair, blue eyes, and a barely detectable soul patch beneath his lower lip that gave Jesse the distinct urge to pluck it off his face. Jesse thought he must be

an actor—a wannabe chorus boy barely out of college. He had the lithe, toned look of a triple threat—dancer, singer, seducer. When Jesse was this age, he had wanted to be such a fellow—the week he had started law school he skipped a civil procedures lecture to audition for the national tour of a Broadway musical, unabashedly singing an unrehearsed a cappella rendition of "The Man That Got Away." Jesse had never grown out of his boyhood summers spent at musical theater camp. The impromptu audition was a dismal, embarrassing experience Jesse never attempted to repeat.

"I used oregano and thyme," the young man said. Pinned to his chest was a name tag that read: "TODD." "But it's the ginger that really makes all the herbs pop out."

"You must be a fabulous chef, Todd," Jesse said, looking for ways to continue the conversation. Jesse hoped he could turn the wannabe dancer into a wannabe lover—or perhaps a satisfying wannabe trick.

"Not yet," Todd said. "Well, not officially. I'm paying my way through culinary school."

"Culinary school?" Jesse repeated. "That sounds wonderful! So you get to sample everything?"

"Close to."

"Any specialties?"

"Pastries," Todd said. "I want to be a pastry chef."

"I adore a good muffin," Jesse said, blushing as his double-entendre failed to register with Todd. But Jesse pursued the flirtation. "Cupcakes, too. Lemon icing. My friend Michelle runs a small bakery—artisan cakes, breads, cookies—she's quite good at it and everything is divine. If you start your own line they could be national favorites. Not just personal ones."

"Are you looking for a gift?" Todd asked in a more business-like manner. He dramatically flipped the omelet as if he were starring in a stage show.

Jesse could not take his eyes off of Todd—or the food. He was starving; the little piece of omelet had set his stomach juices flowing and he wanted another piece. If he couldn't charm this fellow into a dinner date, Jesse hoped at least to taste another piece of Todd's yummy omelet.

Jesse understood enough about the retail business to know the young man was prepped and placed to steer customers toward purchases. "I'm always looking for the right gift to buy a certain someone," Jesse said. "First, I have to find that certain someone."

"Not easy in a big town like this," Todd said.

"Couldn't be too hard for you," Jesse answered. "You must have hundreds of girls—or guys—lining up to sample your cooking."

"Sampling's not the problem," Todd said. "Everyone wants to have a taste."

"You should look for someone who has developed their palate," Jesse said. "Knows what he likes. Someone who appreciates fine dining. Maybe an older fellow. A *gourmet*."

"No way," Todd said. "I want someone who can appreciate what I do. Not some guy who's always gonna tell me how to do it better."

* * *

Adam settled on a system which Shane would install as soon as the Porsche was repaired. Adam had offered to make the full payment in cash on installation, but Shane wanted an upfront deposit with a credit card. The negotiations and details had cooled Adam's sexual tension—and hopes—and the transaction had taken longer than Shane had promised.

Adam followed Shane up the basement stairs. In the front room of Psycho Tattoo, Gabe was talking with a dark-haired young man wearing jeans and a leather vest. Shane pumped knuckles with the guy. He motioned toward Adam, but before Shane had finished the introductions, Mitch, as the fellow had been introduced, said, "Sure, I know the doc. We go way back. Never thought I'd see you in here, though."

Mitch—or Mitchell as Adam had known him—was a former patient of Adam's. It had been more than five, maybe six, years since his last session with the boy. (His parents had brought him in for counseling after discovering a copy of *The Satanic Bible* beneath his bed.) That depressed boy with low self-esteem and a substance-abuse problem was now a twenty-something young man—taller,

darker, his neck and back and arms thick with muscles. "You're looking good, Mitchell," Adam said. They shook hands. Adam tried not to feel trapped or compromised by being discovered at Psycho Tattoo. Mitchell had been one of those troubled teenage boys in black T-shirts with self-inflicted cigarette burns hanging out in the parking lot. Adam had guided him through individual and group therapy sessions, helping him isolate his hobbies and passions—repairing cars, carpentry, working out—from his anti-social and destructive behavior. He had seen Mitchell now and then at the hospital; he was the friend of Luke, a radiology assistant who was often suspected of lifting supplies and medications, though no charges had ever been formally filed against him. It made sense that Mitchell would end up back here even after years of counseling—if Shane could offer Adam an illegal steroid kit, Psycho Tattoo was probably the front for a black-market prescription racket—and Mitchell and Luke were a likely source of those goods.

"Just checking out Shane's artwork," Adam said. He immediately regretted the lie because of the baffled look Shane threw at him. Sooner or later it would come out that he was here purchasing a stolen satellite radio system. Adam persisted with the ruse in order to toss out a compliment. "He's got more talent than he'll admit."

"Dude, he's the best," Mitch said, and rolled up his sleeve, revealing a blocky red-and-black tattoo of a cross—or a sword, depending on your frame of reference—on his inner forearm. It was clearly Shane's design, though a bit too Gothic for Adam's taste. Adam's early therapeutic work with the boy had not erased the young man's obsession for heavy metal music. The execution and design of the tattoo was superb.

"You ink it too?" Adam asked Shane.

"No way," Shane answered. "Gabe's got a steadier touch than me."

Adam's pager vibrated against his leg. He lifted it up, checked the number, apologizing to the two guys as he reached for his cellphone.

It was Thea. When she answered Adam's call, she explained that Suzanne Russo was asking for an appointment with Adam as soon

as possible about her daughter Gina.

"I thought Dr. Pynter was taking the case," he answered. Gina was a fourteen-year-old girl who was cutting herself. Her father had not been comfortable with Adam as his daughter's psychiatrist and had arranged for Ellen Pynter, a female colleague, to take over the case.

"Dr. Pynter suggested that Mrs. Russo call you."

He told Thea to clear something for the Russos on Monday. When he hung up, Adam had missed another call—from Jesse. He took the pause of checking the message as an opportunity to strategize his alibis, if one or more were needed. He could justify the trip to Psycho Tattoo by saying that Shane had approached him for help as an artist, or by saying he had gotten a tip at the gym about a black market of steroids and he was checking out the source before reporting it to the authorities. His word would be good against theirs—that's just the way the system worked, a doctor's word was always more reliable than that of a "freelance" electronics salesman.

Jesse had left Adam a sugary sweet faux-concerned message, which Adam decided to ignore responding to. He punched in his speed-dial code for the hospital and told Thea he was going to need more time and to ask Dr. Kestenbaum to see his afternoon patients.

"Your friend called," Thea said, with hint of sarcasm in her voice. "He seemed concerned. *Slightly concerned*." Thea disliked Jesse as much as Jesse disliked her. "I know. I'll give him a call shortly," Adam said.

When he hung up, Adam asked Gabe, "You got a book on kanji symbols? Something small and nice and full of meaning?"

* * *

Panic hit Jesse when the salesman's attention fell away. He made a few more remarks about cooking ("This is really good! You should put together your own cookbook!"), a last-ditch effort of flattery ("And put your picture on the cover! I bet that would sell a lot of

copies!), and purchased a Dream Coat skillet which he had shipped to Pennsylvania. At the back of his mind was the thought that if he never used it, he could return it to another store, maybe on his next trip to Philadelphia, or give it as a Christmas gift. But Jesse was bothered more by the idea that he had lost any shred of desirability. For a brief moment, he considered again the pros and cons of liposculpture.

It was close to noon when he wandered out of Bloomingdale's, having also bought wine glasses, a small, electric panini grill, three sweaters, two extra-large polo shirts on sale, and a necktie for Adam—all of which he was having shipped.

On Fifty-Seventh Street, Jesse window-shopped as he walked toward Fifth Avenue. It was bright and sunny, one of those amazingly perfect days that can seem so rare and treasured when living in the city. At Tiffany's, he headed downtown, trying to find a comfortable stride within the traffic of pedestrians. After all those years in Manhattan, Jesse could never figure why the sidewalks were busy throughout the day. *Who were these people? Tourists? Out of town business dealers? Commuters from New Jersey and Connecticut?* It was a delicate ballet, looking out for yourself and watching others. Taxis and buses barreling by. Messengers and delivery boys on bikes, spiking right through the crowd. And men. Men of all ages, sizes, and fashion sense striding and talking and shopping and going on to their next destination. Jesse's biggest flaw was that he fell in love immediately, hundreds, thousands of times daily. Everywhere—anywhere—his imagination created seductions and conversations and relationships with men on the street, men at the grocery, men at the gas station and on television and on the Web. It wasn't a parade of desire and lust, but a fully plotted scenario, a game of what if? What if *he* were my boyfriend, where would *we* go on our first date? What kind of furniture would *we* have? What would *he* be like in the morning? Where would *we* go for our anniversary?

At Fiftieth Street Jesse passed by the building where he had worked seven (hard, laborious) years as a corporate travel planner—scheduling trips and conventions and banquets for clients

and executives. It was a thankless job—someone always wanting something better than what Jesse could arrange for them—and he remembered the day his boss Nina made him re-book hotel rooms in London more than six times because she wasn't satisfied with the hotel. Jesse had fled to the restroom to hide his frustration and had only returned to his desk when Tanya had brazenly entered the men's room and told Jesse she was sinking from covering for him. Jesse studied the faces exiting the revolving door of the lobby of the building, hoping he might notice a former coworker. For a brief, nostalgic second, he thought about using his cellphone to call Beth or Amy to tell them he was downstairs on the sidewalk and thinking of them—and guess what?—that he was living a free and fabulous life away from the hideousness of that horrible nine-to-five job and miserable service profession.

Jesse walked past his past—the deli where he used to order lunch, the kiosk where he bought newspapers and magazines. He caught sight of his reflection in the tinted windowpanes and found himself smiling. The smile elicited a cruise from a businesswoman with a too-fast stride, then one from a man behind her, then a younger man, a fellow so slim and well-dressed and breathtaking that Jesse twirled around to see if the man looked over his shoulder to offer Jesse a more serious cruise. Jesse kept the motion of his body spinning to hide his disappointment when it didn't happen, pretending as if he were a tourist suddenly confused of his whereabouts.

He had miscalculated the time he needed to walk to Forty-Fourth Street. Stuart was already seated at the restaurant when Jesse arrived. He rose when Jesse approached the table and they air-kissed a greeting, Jesse trying to hide the shock from his face on how Stuart had aged since their last luncheon, four years ago. Stuart had been Jesse's first affair after his relationship with Adam began. He and Adam had fought over the price of a gym membership—it was out of Adam's budget but necessary for his psychological health, or so he pleaded his case to Jesse to justify the expense. Jesse thought Adam's motivation was to use the better body he could get at the gym to find another boyfriend—and Jesse had stormed out of the apartment and met Stuart at a bar.

"You look divine," Jesse lied, his eyes scanning Stuart's wiry, thinning gray hairline; his face gaunt and creased with lines, as if he had dropped a lot of weight or was sick. "I hope you didn't dress up for me."

Stuart was wearing a dark green suit, a youngish cut with wide shoulder pads which Jesse thought looked desperate, an old man clinging to whatever youthful shape he could recreate.

"I had a meeting this morning," Stuart said. "About a retrospective. Can you believe we've made it to this age?"

Jesse didn't like being lumped into the same generation as Stuart, but he did his best to hide his frown. There was twenty years difference between them. Two decades. Stuart was forty-seven when they met; Jesse twenty-seven.

Stuart worked as a commercial photographer and now lived in Los Angeles, his fees rising higher and higher as his commissions grew fewer and fewer. Jesse still corresponded with him occasionally by e-mail—most often after Stuart sent Jesse his latest advertisement or design campaign, usually involving a shirtless young man. They traded juicy little asides, flattering and flirting with each other, asking who they were sleeping with and if they had found their recent sexual partners enjoyable. Stuart, now almost seventy (the age of Jesse's father), continued to sleep with his young models—both male and female—and he loved to e-mail Jesse about their best and worst attributes in bed. ("He wasn't very good sucking cock, but he turned out to be a terrific bottom once he sorta woke up.") On Jesse's part his own affairs were fantasy and fabrication, though Jesse believed that Stuart had no notion of that. In Stuart's mind, Jesse was still having one lurid affair after the next behind Adam's back, when, in fact, little or nothing had happened and, if it had, there was usually a financial transaction involved (on Jesse's part).

Now, Jesse believed that maybe Stuart was inventing as much of an extracurricular sex life as he was. *Why is every gay man so eager to prove his sex life is like a porn star's?* he thought. He was as guilty of this as Stuart was, particularly when it came to flirting and gossiping on the Internet. Jesse was now only slightly older than

the age Stuart was when they first met. Sex or no sex, in the present tense and in real life, Jesse *still* believed he could be desirable to another man—all he needed to do was to find someone like he had been when he was young and had stumbled into Stuart.

Jesse had planned the trip to the city more than a week ago—the consultation, the luncheon, a possible tête-à-tête—since he had not seen Stuart in such a long time, there was a small hope that they could rekindle their affair. Now Jesse was confused—Stuart was an old man—*elderly—an elderly gentleman who didn't look well*—and Jesse did not feel a single cell of thrill at the possibility of sex with Stuart. What did that say about himself—*Am I really that old? Have I aged that badly, too?*

Still, Jesse continued to do what he did best. *Flirt.* "That's a lovely tie," he told Stuart. "The colors are exquisite. The bright green jumps right out at you."

"A gift from a Brazilian boy I shot about a month ago."

"Oh?" Jesse asked, in a tone that meant he wanted more details.

"Beautiful skin. Uncut. Long black hair."

"Ah, Tarzan."

"No. More like Boy. He was modeling jeans. Or he was wearing jeans when we started."

"And when you finished?"

"*I* was finished," Stuart said, and chuckled. "I had to go and take a nap I was so exhausted."

They laughed and ordered drinks—Jesse ordered a martini, Stuart ordered an iced tea, saying he had another "afternoon appointment," which Jesse felt was code for "we're not going to be sleeping together on this trip or ever again, especially since I can still lure young teenagers into my bed."

Jesse battered around a slight disappointment until the waiter reappeared and took their order—a clean-shaven young man with startling green eyes—and Jesse realized there was a huge, wide, and enormous city bustling around him, full of possibility. He didn't need to look to Stuart for fulfillment or validation. There was always something to do *after* Stuart.

"You're looking healthy," Stuart said, and Jesse wondered if that was a way to say that the fat cells he was storing at his waist were enough to feed a starving African country.

"Adam keeps me in shape," Jesse replied. "All that fighting."

"How *is* Adam these days?"

"Annoying as ever."

"Did you ever tell him about that weekend we spent in Geneva?"

Jesse's first romantic fling with Stuart was an impromptu trip to Switzerland. Jesse had told Adam that he was spending the weekend in Palm Beach with his father. "Of course not!" Jesse said. "Adam's more jealous of my traveling than of my boyfriends."

"I saw him mentioned in one of my art journals," Stuart said. "He's amassed quite a collection."

"He could retire on what he's invested in those pieces," Jesse said. "Too bad he doesn't dote on me as much. It might make us a happy couple. The last painting he bought he visited the gallery six or seven times before he made the decision to buy it."

"Sounds like the beginning of a happy relationship,"

"Sure, for the *painting*," Jesse said. "Adam didn't tell me he had bought it. He didn't even tell me he was considering buying it. I was home when a man from the gallery delivered it and since I knew nothing about it, not a shred of a tiny detail, I didn't tell Adam it came. I knew he had spent a fortune on it. After all these years of looking at that crappy art he buys I can at least tell when one of them is expensive and when he's been fleeced. He was fleeced on this one. It was god-awful ugly. I put it in the basement because I couldn't stand to look at it. He could have at least shown it to me before he bought the hideous thing, then I *might* have warmed to it. I heard him on the phone the next day with the dealer having a frantic conversation about the whereabouts of the painting. Finally, he hangs up and asks me where I put the painting. I pretended not to understand and when he asked again, I said I thought he had bought the picture frame, not the lousy painting that was inside it and it was in the basement. One of my more subtle ways of wounding his pride over his artistic eye."

Their meals arrived. Jesse mentioned that Rocco, Stuart's long-ago assistant who now lived in Allentown, was still happily in love with his younger boyfriend. Stuart spoke more about the curator he had met and what kind of exhibition the gallery was focusing on—a series of casual nudes which Stuart had taken throughout his career—and if they would assemble a catalog.

"You don't need my permission," Jesse said, feeling a light dizziness from his martini. "If you need it."

On the trip to Geneva Jesse had posed for Stuart in the empty lobby of a ski lodge beside a fireplace, a room of dark beams and Alpine furniture. He was both shy and thrilled that a professional photographer had wanted to capture him nude at a moment of happiness.

"Those were never my favorite," Stuart said. "You had such a look of guilt on your face."

"Guilt?"

"Yes, guilt. And ashamed," Stuart said. "Like you were doing something you knew you shouldn't be doing. Like you had left someone important behind."

* * *

Erik was Thai, not Chinese or Japanese. Adam met him on a weekend when Jesse was abroad, checking out potential convention space for an international labor organization, back in the days when Jesse had *worked*. Adam had taken the train to Connecticut to see Claire, a friend from medical school, who was now a resident at the hospital in Bridgeport. Erik worked at a new Thai restaurant owned by his older friend Will. Claire was a regular customer at Will's restaurant and had recorded an outgoing message on the answering machine detailing the location and hours of operation because none of the staff spoke English well enough to do it themselves. Erik, barely in his twenties, knew only a few words and phrases of English, among them certain neighborhoods and streets of Manhattan, including the area of the West Village where Adam lived. While Adam and Claire were eating at the restaurant, Erik sat at the table and asked

Adam a few questions, to practice his English, though Adam got the distinct impression it was in order to flirt, especially when Erik brought them complimentary dishes to taste. Before the meal was finished, Erik had offered to drive Adam back to Manhattan.

When Erik left the table—Adam and Claire had laughed—Was Erik gay? Claire hadn't known so—she had suspected Will might be gay, but not Erik, though it made sense that they *both* might be. Did Erik know how to drive? Claire hadn't ever seen him driving, but he must travel somehow to reach the restaurant from wherever he lived. Did he have a driver's license if he couldn't speak English? And why was he going to Manhattan—a two-hour's drive from the restaurant?

Adam, with a spark of adventure in Jesse's absence and an even hotter flame of infatuation for Erik (the young man was thin and adorable—almost too pretty for a guy), had agreed to the ride back to the city. Erik did know how to drive, and, according to what Adam could understand when they left the restaurant together, was the owner of the red Mustang he unlocked and shifted into high gear on the Interstate. They spent the ride listening to Erik's newly purchased CDs—American singers and bands Adam also knew from the radio or music videos.

When they reached the Village, Adam invited Erik upstairs to the apartment, before Erik went on whatever errand he had planned. Erik walked in and saw the curios Jesse had lined up on the bookshelves—photographs of Adam and Jesse together along with souvenirs from their trips—a mini-statue of the Eiffel Tower, a snow globe with the Coliseum inside, a marble paperweight in the shape of a four-leaf clover. In perfect English, Erik said to Adam, "Let's do it."

Their affair lasted six weeks—Erik was a vacation for Adam, a visit to an exotic and strange foreign country of smells and tastes and signs and mysteries—Adam had grown tired and restless after twelve years of living (and fighting) with Jesse. Sexually, they were a good fit, Erik passive and attendant until he was ready to turn the tables and become audacious and dominant. Adam's bedroom post-coital conversations with Erik never went beyond music—or

television shows—and never deeper than the question, "Do you like?" and the answers "Yes," "Sure" or "No."

From their first time together, Erik was aware of Jesse's presence in Adam's life. Once Jesse had returned from his trip abroad, Adam was forced into arranging afternoon trysts, sometimes at the apartment, but mostly in a rented hotel room in Stamford, a few steps from the train station. Erik never pressured Adam into choosing between either him or Jesse, but it was unavoidable for Adam to draw comparisons between the two. Erik was uninhibited in bed, the sex full of passion and feeling, but outside of bed he was directionless and unfocused, acquiescing to anything Adam desired, as if he were a loyal servant. Jesse had little spirit left in the bedroom (as if he were bored with Adam's needs and wants), but as a couple Jesse meticulously planned their vacations and parties and adventures. The affair had been a touchstone and a turning point for Adam—Adam was so aware of what kind of relationship (and sex) he would and would not be having with Jesse. And Erik. What he was missing out on. And what he would gain. Now, in retrospect, Adam ached for another lover like Erik, an incommunicado sex machine without any sort of personal demand. Four years ago he and Jesse had taken a trip to Asia to celebrate their twentieth anniversary—visiting Tokyo, Hong Kong, Seoul, and Bangkok. Adam had been unable to erase the continual impression of Erik from his mind—an affair he had ended more than eight years before that trip. Everywhere they traveled those three weeks he saw Erik—Erik at a market, Erik at a food stand, Erik in the hallway of their hotel, Erik beckoning him to join him in bed. At one point, Adam had snuck away from Jesse to find a massage parlor listed in a gay guide book in order to indulge himself in the fantasy of finding Erik again, only to be disappointed by a toothless hustler.

Now, years later at Psycho Tattoo, Adam flipped through the tattoo catalog of kanji symbols and their translations, thinking again about Erik. Shane and Mitch had disappeared down the hallway. Adam wondered if there was some sort of transaction going on—an exchange of drugs, the location of stolen equipment revealed. He wasn't convinced that Shane was the buyer, more likely

a messenger or go-between, of sorts. Perhaps they were only doing what two young hot-blooded regular straight guys do—leering at photographs of busty nude women in the magazines in the ADULTS ONLY room. What crime was there in that? It was exactly why such a place like this existed.

Adam's exclusion oddly bothered him, however, even though he had little appreciation for a woman's anatomy beyond the annual bests of red carpet Oscar gowns. Again, he grew annoyed. He was wasting time when he should be at work. There was no way that he would get a tattoo done unless he had mulled it over for some time. He was too cautious and conservative. And what if this catalog was wrong? What if the symbol he had picked for "Freedom" was misdrawn—like a misspelled word—and meant something entirely different—liked "Fried Head" or "Fucked Up Dude?"

Shane stepped back into the room to answer his ringing cellphone. "Hey bro, what's up?" He paced around the plywood floor in a circle, listening, until he answered, "A whole case? I think I might have someone interested."

He placed the cellphone against his chest and said to Adam, "Doc, I can get you a great deal on a case of Krug 1990. Real high-end stuff."

Adam was cranky. He felt it in his gut. He'd emptied his wallet more than once. This ride to work was endless and costing him a fortune. He'd only agreed because of a silly physical attraction to Shane, a foolish fantasy that was not going to be reciprocated. Shane would never be his new lover. If Shane had been Jesse and the situation the same, Adam's immediate reaction would have been openly volatile and disgusted. Instead, he held it inside. *Politely.* What if he was being set up? What if Shane and Mitchell had simply walked into the other room and devised a simple way to scam some more money out of him?

Adam's displeasure must have been showing on his face when Mitchell stepped out of the hallway, his eyes black and shining as if he had just snorted a line of coke, and said, "Man, a whole case? Is that Paul? Doc, you should check it out. Paul's got a real sweet set-up."

Adam felt boxed in, as if he were a trapped and caged wild animal. But he was also compelled by some kind of strange social grace that he didn't know he still had. He wanted to go exactly where Shane wanted to lead him. He wanted the *experience* of it. He *wanted* Shane.

"I'll make it worth your while," Shane said. "I'll even let you steer the chopper."

* * *

Paul's sweet set-up was through the back entrance of Bowl-Arena. Paul was the assistant manager and his second cousin was a co-owner. Down a flight of stairs and into another basement—this one long and wide and brightly lit—and stretching beneath the entire length of the lanes of the bowling alley above it—were aisles of boxes and crates of alcohol, bottled water, and canned goods, some of it donated by churches and civic organizations to be shipped out immediately when the next national disaster hit; other products—such as the wines and liquors—were intended to be resold to whatever market was the most lucrative, with the profits contributed to one charity or another (or so Shane had explained on their descent into the room, though Adam also believed that in this case "charity" might have a rather nebulous definition). Above their heads, the sound of rolling balls along the hardwood lanes could be faintly heard, and the striking and falling of pins and the machinery to reset them in place, just enough to dispel the concentration, if you were not used to it. "After the first five minutes, you don't hear nothing," Paul told Adam, when Shane had introduced them.

Paul was a tall, gangly, dark-haired fellow with piercing blue eyes, about the same age as Shane, though with a clean-shaved, boyish-looking face. There was an unfinished sweetness to him, as if he hadn't completed maturing and crossing over to the "dark side." Adam found this quality made him more accessible than Shane—at least in his intensifying fantasies. If Adam had to pay for Shane's company hand-over-fist and with an almost certain negative sexual repayment, Paul might be had for a mere compliment and a pat

on the back like a needy puppy. Shane must have sensed Adam's attraction to Paul—he was clearly not letting Adam off his leash; like a bodyguard, he stayed by Adam's side, leading the way through the aisles.

"Adam here gives some great parties," Shane said. "Gets written up in the papers and everything, don't ya, Doc?"

"We usually sponsor the County Firefighters BBQ," Paul said. "My sister's brother-in-law's on the volunteer squad in Warner Township. Everyone always gets blasted."

At the aisle where they stopped, Paul said that the case of Krug 1990 had been donated by a distributor out of Newark (*probably to avoid customs fines*, Adam thought, *if, in fact, it* had *been donated*). The moment that Adam met Paul he knew he wanted to buy the case. He negotiated with a brusque efficiency that surprised himself. He was seldom this aggressive even with the local antique dealers and flea market vendors, usually willing to pay the premium price because these men were generally one- or two-man enterprises; Adam felt they earned a bit of sympathy and extra cash for their hard work, long hours, and passion for art. But Paul was a puppet of a larger entity, or so Adam thought. Adam had some sort of righteousness or ethical justice on his side, if the case of champagne had been stolen off a container dock. And he wanted to be the Alpha Male now, the transaction over, Paul impressed, Shane off his back, and to be on his way to work, without any repercussions—now or eventually, unless, of course, there was some sort of residual physical payout forthcoming from Paul.

The price concluded, they walked toward the stairs and a small desk. Paul accepted credit cards and would have the case delivered the next day to Adam's house. Before the transaction was concluded, Shane said to Paul, "Why don't we give him a taste of the 'Shine?"

"Not sure I'd advise it, Dr. O'Donnell," Paul said, as he led them to a corner of the basement. "Hate for you to show up at work all soused."

"We've been working for about a year on the flavor," Shane said. "Started with a home brewing kit."

At a metal shelving unit that held two boxes of bottles, Paul lifted

a bottle out and flashed Adam the label—'Shine—drawn in Shane's blocky graphic tattoo style. "Nine percent," Paul said. "Higher than the average malt."

From deep within the box Paul lifted out a small paper cup—the kind used for condiments in fast-food restaurants—and poured Adam a taste of the liquor.

Adam smelled the contents of the cup—it was a rich, golden-colored beer, lightly bubbling. He grinned at the two young men, swirling the contents of the tiny paper cup as if he were holding a wine goblet and about to taste a priceless vintage. Adam brought the cup to his lips and held the liquid on his tongue before swallowing it. The insides of his mouth flamed and went numb, leaving a sweet residue of citrus flavor.

"Pretty good," he said to Paul.

"Secret ingredient is raw honey," Shane said. "It keeps the taste mellow and heightens the alcohol during the fermenting process."

Adam was impressed, still focusing his attention toward Paul. He wasn't certain how involved Shane was in this venture—or if he was simply directing Adam to another deal where he might get a finder's fee. "How much a bottle?" he asked. Beside him, Shane was rocking between the toes and heels of his feet, as if to remind Adam he was still there.

"Not for sale, yet," Paul said. "These are samples. We've only got a fifteen gallon set-up right now—over there."

Beyond the shelving was a work table and what looked to be a water heater—but was, instead, a small, microbrewing set-up—and boxes of supplies and materials, and a row of raw honey jars like Adam had noticed at Shane's grandfather's house. "We're saving up for a bigger system which we'll set up upstairs and operate out of the bowling alley. My cousin's already got a liquor license. We'll expand from there."

"Doc, you want to get in? Ground level? Help us get the set-up?" Shane asked.

"You've got a lawyer?" Adam asked.

"We ain't doing nothing illegal," Shane answered nervously.

Paul's shoulders tensed. His mouth opened in surprise. They

had both clearly misunderstood Adam.

"What's your game plan?" Adam asked. "Have you formed a company? Or a partnership?"

"We've just been making beer," Paul said, with a hint of suspicion.

"Damn good beer," Shane added.

They both kept their bodies defensive, like two little boys being reprimanded for torturing their kid sisters.

"If you're going to start a business, you'll need to get all your papers and details in order," Adam said, hoping the young men would see him more as an advisor and not as an older adult. "Protect your recipe. Your business name. There're lots of things to think about. That's why you need a lawyer to help you think it through. For example, if you're going to set up a brewery upstairs in the bowling alley—is your cousin going to charge you rent?"

Shane dropped his head. Paul did not let go of his tense shoulders. It was clear they had not thought any business details through. Adam was stepping on their dreams. The two young men were upset and baffled. Adam enjoyed the moment of being the more knowledgeable adult, though it was clear he had lost Paul's trust. "You've got a good product, that's the first step," Adam said, trying to win him back. "I can see a big demand for a beer like that."

It was Shane, not Paul, who broke their awkwardness.

"That's why we need someone like you, Doc," he said. "A partner to keep us on the right path."

Adam's imagination exploded. A business with two young men. If they went into business together, he'd always have a reason to see Shane and Paul. And they were sure to have other younger friends. Somewhere out of all this there was the potential of finding another lover. It was this possibility, not the partnership in a brewery, that stirred Adam's further interest. *A younger lover. A way to avoid Jesse. Get rid of him. Move on to someone else. A new phase of his life.*

Adam felt reinvigorated, like he had already cast Jesse aside. "We could sit down and work it through," Adam said. "Come to an arrangement."

"You wouldn't mind working with silent partners?" Paul asked. "At first?"

"Silent?" Adam replied. "Why would you want to remain silent? It's your recipe and idea. I should probably be the silent partner."

Paul and Shane shot a glance toward each other. "We've both got about another year and a half before we're twenty-one," Shane said, his face flushing with embarrassment. "Paul's a month older."

Adam held his concern tight between his eyes. Paul and Shane were both minors as far as the state's legal drinking age was concerned. He was literally jumping into bed with minors. *Minors.* In his mind, Adam could hear Jesse's howl exploding in delight at Adam's crimes—he had just purchased a case of champagne from a minor. A minor had just offered him a drink and he'd accepted. Now he was offering to be their upfront partner in a brewery. Beer made by the illegal underaged. In a basement beneath a bowling alley. "*What were you thinking?*" Jesse would scream at him. "They're boys. *Teenagers!* You're a psychiatrist. A *child* psychiatrist. You're supposed to know these things. How is this going to look when it gets out? *You're old enough to be their father!*"

It was Adam's dream now—Adam, the older, wiser, thoughtful partner in a local microbrewery—it had now reawakened another, earlier dream he had entirely forgotten about. When he and Jesse had first purchased the second country house, Adam had imagined setting up a vineyard on the northeastern slope of their new property. A sunny place where he could grow a small crop of grapes. Produce a limited run of a high-end vintage every year as a hobby. Paul and Shane's microbrewery now held that same sort of thrill to him. *A quality product of a small, cottage industry.* Something he could proudly offer his guests at their dinner table. If it didn't work out, he could always take the venture as a business loss. A write-off. "Where there's a law, there's a way," he said to two young men. "There's no reason why we can't see if we could make this work. Let's go upstairs and throw a few balls to celebrate!"

* * *

On his way up the stairs to the bowling alley, Adam's pager vibrated against his legs. For a few minutes, he'd completely forgotten about his responsibilities at the hospital, and this added to his growing guilt. On his incoming call list of his cellphone, he had missed another call from Jesse and several from Thea; the cement walls of the basement blocking his ability to receive calls. He excused himself from Shane and Paul, went to the entrance of the bowling alley to get better reception, and phoned the hospital.

Thea answered the first ring. She uttered a perturbed sigh and patched Adam through to Dr. Kestenbaum, who was checking on the status of a patient's therapy. Adam confirmed the treatment and Kestenbaum asked, "Everything okay? You've got Thea a bit rattled."

"Just some personal issues," Adam said. "Nothing she needs to be concerned about. She's spoiled. She's not used to my being out of her sight."

"Well, I hope you've hidden the body where it can't be found," Kestenbaum laughed. He knew of Adam's cantankerous relationship with Jesse. Everyone on staff knew of Adam's volatile personal life—a sore spot he wanted to correct, but couldn't, though all of them loved spending time with Jesse, found him warm and caring and the funniest guy in the room. Adam chuckled appropriately in response, knowing in his gut, however, that Kestenbaum might be more right than wrong. Some days he did want to kill Jesse and bury the body where it couldn't be found. But today his crime was something more than being professionally irresponsible or doing away with his testy lover. Today, he was corrupting youth and bartering for illegal merchandise, or so it would be seen if his newly laid business plans went awry.

"I'm going to be out the rest of the day," Adam said. "We'll work out some kind of reciprocal coverage next week."

"Don't bother," Kestenbaum answered. "You've checked my back more than enough. Thea know you're not coming in?"

"Not yet," he answered. "Want to patch me back to her?"

Adam told Thea he would be out the rest of the afternoon on "personal issues." She gave him another exasperated sigh. "Do I need to be concerned, Dr. O'Donnell?"

"Not at all, Thea. I need the rest of the day to work through an issue."

He had thought about telling both Kestenbaum and Thea that he was out in the field, doing research and helping with a patient's crisis. But Thea was no fool; she was as good a sharpshooter as Jesse was at detecting his bullshit. It was best to keep these transactions under wraps from the hospital staff. But he had no sort of qualms about letting Jesse know his whereabouts. Or of his new young business partners.

He dialed Jesse's cellphone and was grateful when he was sent directly into voicemail. "Jesse, I've gotten all your messages but was tied up and couldn't call you back promptly. I've been spending the day with Shane—you might remember him from my gym—he's the teenage trainer you thought was so cute. Real cute guy. *Teenager*, you remember. Great body. Blond beard. Nice arms. I'm sure you remember him. I needed his help this morning because of my car situation, so I helped him out with a favor in return. And guess what? It looks like we might go into business with each other. He's got a little business that I think I want to invest in and I want to check it out a bit further. I'll give you more info when I see you later. Or *are* you coming back tonight? And no need to get the champagne for tomorrow night's party. I've got it all taken care of. So don't *ever* tell me that I don't help out."

When he hung up, Adam changed his mind on how to manage his younger potential business partners. It only looked illegal if their presence was kept under wraps. He'd promote Shane and Paul as young entrepreneurs just trying to get their first big break. Drum up some publicity, if necessary, if all the papers and plans went through without a hitch. As far as he knew there were no age restrictions in starting or running a business. There certainly wasn't any crime in *planning* a business. It's not like they were planning a heist. Or a murder. They were simply brewing beer, not consuming it. Young men with a dream.

Shane and Paul were at a table in a section above the bowling lanes, their faces close together as if they were passing secrets. Adam went to the bar which flanked the south end of the bowling

alley, scanned the bottles on the shelves, and caught the attention of the older man who was cleaning glasses.

"I see you have a bottle of rye back there," Adam said.

The man looked up from his sudsy project and answered, "Yup."

"Not many places still stock rye, you know. Went out of fashion long time ago."

"Not many requests for it now, either."

"What say you sell me the whole bottle?"

"Not sure I can do that."

"You need to talk to a manager?"

"Nope, not really."

"So tell me how much you want for the bottle. I got some young friends I want to celebrate with. Going into business together."

"Don't say."

"Yep."

"Well, good for you. But I could get plenty of drinks out of that bottle with the right customer."

"But you just said it was seldom asked for. And I don't want to keep running up to you to keep filling my glass."

"I got your point," the old man said. "Why don't we settle on a hundred even for you to take it off my hands. And celebrate."

"Deal," Adam said. He walked over to a cash machine near the entrance and withdrew money from his bank account. He returned to the bar and paid the old man. He asked for three shot glasses.

"Three?" the old fella asked.

"Three. I'll bring them back when we're done."

"No rush, boss."

Adam took the glasses and the bottle of rye over to the table where Shane and Paul were seated. "I thought we'd toast to celebrate."

Paul gave Adam a worried look and said, "Shouldn't, Doc. I'm on duty till eight."

"One sip to seal our deal."

"What is this stuff?" Shane asked, looking at the label on the bottle.

"Back in the old days every new business deal was sealed with a click of a glass of rye," Adam lied.

Both teenagers gave him a suspicious, confused look. He poured three shots of rye, lifted the glass that was closest to him, and said. "Salut."

The two young men half-heartedly mimicked Adam's gesture. They each let out gasp of dislike as they swallowed the rye.

"That stuff is wicked," Shane said.

Paul let out a disgusted "aaahhgggg" and contorted his face.

"Don't worry, boys," Adam said. "The rest of the bottle is mine."

* * *

Jesse survived making a fool of himself at lunch, or so he thought. He was glad when he and Stuart parted on Broadway, Stuart promising to send an invitation to the gallery opening when the exhibit was scheduled.

Jesse walked downtown, in the direction of Macy's, but he didn't want to do any more shopping. He felt like a vanishing man, aging and tired. He was sleepy after the lunch and the martini and ached for a nap, but he wasn't ready to go back to Pennsylvania. He flipped open the cover of his cellphone. He had missed a call from Adam while he had been eating with Stuart. As he activated the voicemail and listened to Adam's message about spending the day with some teenager from his gym, a wicked rush for retaliation invigorated him. Whomever Adam was with, he'd find someone younger, better-looking, and have sex he could brag about when the moment was right.

At Fortieth Street Jesse caught a taxi and told the driver to take him to the corner of Bleecker and Seventh Avenue in the Village. From his pocket, he pulled the page he had torn from the morning newspaper, an ad for an open house.

A few minutes later he was in front of the building on Carmine Street. He rang the buzzer and asked to see the apartment.

"Top floor," a thin, staticky voice yelled back to him.

The door buzzed and Jesse pushed it open. The lobby was a dingy, narrow hallway with a more narrow set of staircases, the

steps uneven and tilted. Jesse knew before he started climbing the stairs that he could not live in this sort of place—this building and these apartments were for young newcomers to the city—actors and artists who could share tiny cramped spaces in hopes of being discovered and becoming famous. By the second floor he was winded. He slowed his pace, thinking that it was definitely time to reactivate his gym membership, at least to build up his stamina.

There was another floor, and then another floor. As he climbed, sweat started at his forehead and his underarms and he breathed through his mouth. Before taking the sixth set of stairs, he paused on a landing so he wouldn't appear winded to the realtor. In his mind, he could hear Adam laughing at him when he mentioned that he thought he would collapse before getting to the apartment.

A thin young woman with frizzy blond hair met him at the door. She wore raccoon-like eye makeup and had a tiny gold stud piercing her left nostril. She held out her hand and said her name, which Jesse took to be either Stella or Sonja, he couldn't tell which because of her foreign accent. She continued to talk as Jesse entered the apartment, but the words were lost to Jesse as he tried to slow his breathing and his heart rate.

The apartment was a tiny room with a sink, a stove, and a mini-refrigerator against one wall. The windows began low, close to the floor, as if the top floor had been created as an afterthought by dividing the ceiling height of the apartment below. Jesse had forgotten how brutal and expensive living in Manhattan could be, how it was impossible to cook or entertain in some of these small, cramped boxes masquerading as "luxury apartments." The monthly rental fee of this particular unit was ten times higher than the rent he had paid decades ago for the studio on Tenth Street. His disappointment clutched at his throat and gathered in his eyes. He had fantasized about using a Manhattan apartment as a trysting spot for a new lover, or perhaps as a base to begin looking for another boyfriend. He doubted he could lure anyone here—he refused to lie about himself in chat rooms—he always stated his exact age and height and weight, which perhaps accounted for his ever-diminishing encounters. He remembered his own behavior,

years before, when trolling the phone-sex lines for hook ups on the evenings Adam worked the late shift, bypassing potential tricks when they mentioned a broken front door or that he would have to call from the corner first or have to climb six flights to a top-floor apartment. Even at that younger age Jesse was a spoiled and pampered man, only wanting an easy encounter, even in his frustration and desperation. Why would he expect someone else to act differently? Especially in Manhattan.

He stood at the window and leaned down to look at the street below. The agent mentioned the benefits of the nearby subway lines. When he had first moved to Manhattan, Jesse's life revolved around the Village. He had showed off his favorite stores and restaurants to his friends and family on their visits. There was the antique clothing store on Greenwich, the video store on Seventh, the gay bookstore on Christopher, and the Eighth Street Cinema where he could spend a day watching a triple feature of his favorite old musicals. There was Elephant and Castle on Greenwich Avenue, where Jesse often went for dinner with Emily, his hometown friend, Two if By Land, where he had celebrated those first anniversaries with Adam, and the Mexican place on MacDougal where every dish arrived with thick cheese melted on top of black beans. His dentist had been on Patchin Place, his optometrist on Bedford, his internist on Washington Square. There was the gay health clinic on Grove Street, where he had gone his first week in the city when he had suspected he had gotten the clap from a trick he had met at the Laundromat, and Clyde's on Bleecker Street, where he met Clay for brunch, his eyes shiny and bleary from a night at the baths or dancing at West Twelve. Clay's apartment had been on Thirteenth Street, next door to a vocational high school that had later become the building housing the city's gay and lesbian community center. They were always meeting for drinks at one of neighborhood gay bars: Julius, Uncle Charlie's, Ty's, the Monster, even Marie's Crisis, on the nights they were willing to join in with a rowdy group of old-timers singing show tunes. Both then and now, Jesse filled all this with a romantic sentiment he knew the times—and perhaps the sexual practices—did not possess. He had been looking for sex, after all. *Sex?* No, he reconsidered. Not *just*

sex. That really wasn't who he was. What sex might unexpectedly bring. Love. *True love.* He had always been looking for love.

He shook his head and told the agent the apartment was not what he had in mind. He hadn't given up on living in the Village, but he was not ruling out the possibility of another part of the city. Since his sojourn in the Village, gay life had moved uptown—to Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen—maybe it was time for him to look in those neighborhoods, and he had a vision of himself walking along Eighth Avenue, arching his eyebrows and starting a conversation with a handsome young stranger.

"Any other listings?" he asked the realtor. "Chelsea co-ops, maybe? Condos?"

Stella—or Sonja—listed off a few buildings and their prices. Jesse mentally calculated how he would have to shift funds, sell some of his stocks, maybe borrow against a line of credit to make a down payment. He imagined a moving van filling up with the oversized furniture in the Pennsylvania house which would never fit in a tiny apartment. He took the woman's business card and gave her a weary grin and said he would call and make an appointment the next time he was coming to the city.

Downstairs, on the street, he checked his cellphone for messages. There were two missed calls. The first was from Michelle, telling him that the anniversary cake he had ordered for the dinner party he was throwing tomorrow night for Matt and Peter was ready and not to pick it up until after ten o'clock Saturday morning.

Next came Adam's roaring voice: "If anyone deserves a day off, *I* deserve a day off," Adam shouted on the voicemail. "Some of us have to work for a living and some of us deserve a day off! And just to let you know, Shane is a very polite and artistic young man in addition to being *incredibly* attractive. You know how it is with young men, I am having a *wonderful* time today, Jesse. Wonderful! Don't even *dare* to discourage me."

The tone of Adam's voice made Jesse's blood boil. He had not an iota of desire to return to Pennsylvania. He flagged down a cab on Sixth Avenue and gave the driver the address of the Dorset, "Sixth and Fifty-second." *Let Adam throw Matt and Peter a party*

by himself, he thought. *Let him find a way to explain why Jesse was a no-show. Let him try to cook and boil and baste and toss. Wouldn't that turn out to be a lot of mess for him to clean up alone?*

* * *

Hunger hit him on his fifth or sixth shot. Paul had set them up at a lane, though he disappeared for long stretches to "take care of something at the front desk." Adam had easily won the first game, the alcohol and his enthusiasm (along with a string of strikes) pushing him to score almost two hundred. After that, Shane was more determined to win, and Adam enjoyed the young man straining and strategizing to beat his older opponent, even as Adam himself began to feel the weight of the ball and the sleepy pull of the alcohol. Soon Adam was dumping his balls, twisting up on his follow-through so that it landed with a heavy thump against the floor and rolled into the gutter. It was impossible for him to beat Shane even if he tried.

After their third game Adam gave Shane some money to order food. The young man returned with trays of hotly fried hamburgers and fries. Adam knew he was becoming drunk when he said, in a loud and cheery voice, "This burger is terrific! This might be one of the best burgers I ever had! I bet a great, mellow beer would go real good with this burger! What this burger needs to make itself better is the right pitcher of beer!"

He'd made Shane laugh, however, which was part of his immediate strategy. The other was to change the scenario and appear more careless than controlled. Maybe the key to Shane's heart and crotch was not through money and aggression (and a potential business partnership) but through recklessness and vulnerability. Perhaps if Shane saw that he could take advantage of Adam sexually (as well as monetarily) something like that might happen. Something else that Shane could get away with and Adam wouldn't even make an attempt to prevent.

* * *

The hotel room was small and uncluttered, a queen-sized bed with a faded satiny green covering, a yellowed print of an English country hunting scene framed above the weathered, dark oak headboard. The furniture—a desk, a chair, and a bureau holding the television set—had an out-of-date elegance, early American pieces that might have been fashionable in the Forties. For a moment, Jesse regretted not checking into one of the trendy, minimalist boutique hotels that had popped up in every neighborhood—he could be in a room with a Warhol print on the wall and starched white sheets on the bed, a vase of oversized sunflowers on the desk, feeling trendy and fabulous. He could have met someone while hanging out in the lobby or the hotel bar where the lighting was sure to be dim and stylish, designed to make anyone his age look chic and glamorous. But there was something about the Dorset that reminded Jesse of his boyhood and his first visits to the city with his dad and younger brother Ben. They had always found a room here, always walked across town for dinner and to see a Broadway show. It had always seemed a safe place to him in the city, a home away from home, the place you could hide in if the city became too overwhelming.

Jesse unlaced his shoes and slipped them off, the cool temperature of the room airing out his socks, his feet expanding and relaxing. He lay on the bed thinking about how soon he might re-enter the world of Manhattan, how he could settle in if he had a new apartment—how he could pick out a favorite restaurant, a favorite bar, a new gym, and a new crop of boyfriends.

There was always an invitation to something—an art gallery opening, a book launch, an off-Broadway workshop, a new movie screening—he simply needed to touch base with old friends to get re-invited to these events—those friends who were still alive and living in the city—the ones who always showed up in the country for their parties—they would shepherd him back into the limelight—Carl, the theatrical publicist. Megan, the screenwriter. Josh, the illustrator. There was always someone coming into town to entertain—Rick, his friend from college, Matt and Peter could drive in from Pennsylvania—he could even see more of Stuart. And there was always the potential of meeting someone new; he always

enjoyed meeting the friends of his friends, always enjoyed trying to find a common denominator with a stranger.

Jesse used the remote control to turn on the television. The sound instantly bombarded him and he lowered the volume. He switched through the channels—Judge Judy, Ellen, Oprah, a Bond movie, cartoons, soccer, news, history of the Roman Empire, and the hundred hottest couples in Hollywood. He wasn't really interested in watching anything; he only wanted the sound to keep him company. There was an itch of restlessness consuming him, like a kid arriving at Disney World and being told that he couldn't enter the park until the following day. He wanted to be back out in the city—walking, exploring, hoping, *living*.

That was it. He wanted his life back. He wanted to meet someone new—a new, handsome, good-looking, attentive guy—someone who he could unfold the arc of his life to, the ups and downs of his boyhood ("I was always lousy at baseball," "My true passion was eating cupcakes."), his skirmishes in business and art ("I didn't go to college to buy my boss coffee," "My brand of humor just wasn't appreciated."), and his misery and woes of living for so many years with Adam ("He can never remember my birthday, so he always gets mad when I purposely forget his, even though we're just days apart.") Adam always hated Jesse using him as bait for a sympathetic ear, for bringing strangers into their lives to judge them, or, rather, judging Adam's worth in Jesse's epic marathon of wretchedness. There had been the time they had taken a cruise to Alaska, five—no, seven years ago, and Jesse had befriended a couple from Long Island—a dentist and his wife, Hannah, a heavily made-up woman with the mannerisms of a small-town drag queen. Jesse spent the seven-day cruise bonding with Hannah, trading gossipy horror stories of their mates' habits and flaws as they sailed toward Prince William Sound. On the third day at sea, when Jesse told Hannah about Adam's lack of bathroom etiquette and neglectful hygiene, Adam shouted at Jesse to stop.

"What are you doing?" Adam asked. "You are literally airing our dirty laundry!"

"Stop telling me what to do."

"You're turning me into an ogre."

"Well, you are."

"How would you like it if I did this to you?"

"Go ahead," Jesse replied. "Make my day. Go out and tell everyone on this dump of a boat what a horrible boyfriend I am. How I invite all your friends to your parties with handwritten invitations that I spend hours designing and writing, how I plan out every hors d'oeuvre and item on the menu, and then spend more time cooking and ordering all of it. How I'm left with cleaning up every piece of trash—every little sticky napkin and messy plate and greasy toothpick you and your hospital buddies can mess up and drop on the floor. Then see if I stick around."

"You told me you wanted to do that. You *love* being the entertainer. You wanted to be in charge."

"In charge, not the hired help."

That was it. He wasn't appreciated. Adam didn't know what a catch he had found. One day Adam would regret that he hadn't given Jesse more attention. Jesse flipped through more channels and regretted that there was no one he could call to complain about Adam. Adam skipping work and playing hooky with a teenage boy, pretending that they were starting a business together. More likely, Adam was throwing cash at the guy, dumping out wads of money from his wallet. *Let him!* For a moment, Jesse thought again about calling Clay to complain about Adam. Clay, Clay, *Clay*. Could Clay have *ever* realized how much he was missed? Or had time and Jesse's imagination stretched the friendship all out of context? It was still incredible to Jesse that he could no longer drop in on that sunless, lamp-lighted cave of books and magazines and videos Clay had lived in. He wondered if he called Clay's old phone number who might answer—would he have known Clay? Would they want to hear about Jesse's day? Jesse had never had someone like Clay, since Clay's death—there had been attempts to transform other friends—but they were resistant to the constant calls, the neediness in Jesse's voice, and Jesse soon learned to resist showing that neediness himself. But inside him it had never disappeared. It haunted him and made him feel lonely. And unloved.

He settled on a Chinese-language station. He understood not a single word of Chinese, but the sound was appropriate background noise—not quite as relaxing and meditative as classical music or new-age synthesizers, like the kind he slipped into his CD player in the bedroom of the house, but still capable of knocking out his thoughts without creating new ones.

He looked at his watch to check the time, then closed his eyes. A few minutes would be all the time he would need to recharge. He had no intention of staying in the hotel room all night. Not unless his intentions brought him back here and he wasn't alone.

* * *

There were plenty of disagreements over money.

In their first years together Adam had never had "money in the bank." It all went out as fast as he could earn it. Jesse never had money worries. His grandmother was a guardian angel in this respect, regularly sending him money while she was alive and leaving the bulk of her estate to Jesse and his brother Ben after her death. Adam and Jesse did not share bank accounts or credit cards. Adam wrote Jesse a check each month for his portion of the rent, gas, electricity, and phone. He never questioned if there were overages or shortages—Jesse talked on the phone a lot more than Adam did, but Adam called long distance more often. Both were content that it all evened out in the end because they regarded themselves as a couple.

Their fifth year together, Jesse came home from work one day and said, "I don't feel fulfilled. I'm quitting my job."

Adam was working three jobs to pay back his college and medical school loans. "What do you mean?"

"I'm thirty. I want to do something that I want to do."

Since leaving law school Jesse had been working as a corporate publicist, first as an assistant and then as an associate. He promoted a popular brand of spray paint. He wrote press releases about new colors and new formulas for new colors, made up "to do" projects for housewives to create and sent them to crafts magazines, and

occasionally spoke to an elderly race-car driver who wore a patch on his uniform promoting the brand name. Hardly the glamorous job he imagined for himself when he moved to Manhattan. In fact, he hated the job, felt his talents were wasted.

"Your press releases are funny," Adam said. "What's wrong with them?

"It's spray paint, Adam," Jesse said. "*Spray paint*. How funny and exciting can I keep making spray paint?"

"What is it you want to do?" Adam asked. He was willing to be supportive. To a point. And in those early years he had been very supportive.

"Produce."

"Produce what?"

"A show. A Broadway show."

"Like Mickey and Judy?"

"Mickey and Judy did summer stock," Jesse said. "I want to produce a Broadway musical."

"What do you know about producing a Broadway musical?"

"All you need is money. I just find people with a lot of money who want to invest in a Broadway show."

"Where are you going to find a lot of people with a lot of extra money?"

"My dad."

"So your father is going to produce a Broadway musical?"

"I knew you wouldn't be supportive."

"I am supportive. But you've never even hinted that you want to produce a Broadway show. How does that make me feel, coming out of left field? It's like I don't even know who you are."

"This apartment is full of show tunes! How could you not know?"

"You won't be the star of the show."

"I'll be an Associate Producer."

"And you'd quit your job for this? You only get paid if the show makes a profit. That could take years. Even I know that about show biz."

"Go ahead. Knock me down. Flush my dream into the toilet!"

"I can't support both of us. I'm not making that kind of money."

"It's not about money."

"No, it's not, is it? You've already made up your mind."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you don't care what I think one way or the other. I'm not a part of this decision because you've already left me out of it."

"I want your support. I want to know that you're supportive of this decision."

"Sure, go ahead," Adam said. "Quit your job. Waste your dad's money."

Jesse's short career as the Associate Producer of a Broadway revival only lasted a few months. The show closed out of town, during tryouts in San Diego. Jesse called from the hotel where he was staying to give Adam the news. "Don't tell me I told you so," he said. He was crying, depressed at his failure, depressed at being away from Adam so long. He had not liked the cast, not liked the director or the choreographer. He hadn't bonded with anyone in the production. There was no one to hear his woes except for Adam.

"I won't," Adam said. "As long as you promise never to say the same about me."

Jesse often forgot his promise. His Broadway producing experience left a bitter taste. He never found a job that made him feel special: wanted, loved, important, popular. He envied Adam's rising salary and financial independence. Jesse had taken a job as a corporate travel planner, another bad decision because of the long hours and low pay. He thought he and Adam overbid on the house on Ingham Road, were swindled by the contractors on the renovations of the farmhouse, and had been milked by salesmen with upgrades and undercoating on the Saab and Porsche. He resented the amount of money Adam invested in his art collection. For birthdays and anniversaries, Jesse gave Adam expensive gifts—Burberry coats, Brooks Brothers shirts, Armani suits. For himself, he always shopped on sale, something his mother had beaten into his brain. "Why don't you ever buy me something nice?" he complained last month, when Adam brought home an expensive

painting the size of a postage stamp.

"I paid for dinner last week," Adam said. "When we went out."

"Dinner?" Jesse answered. "You know I've been on a diet! I hardly ate anything!"

"What do you want?" Adam asked. "What can I buy you?"

Youth? Happiness? Peace? Jesse thought. "Surprise me," he said. "Give me something that shows you still care."

* * *

In the restroom Adam held back the urge to vomit. He rinsed the sweat and grease from his face with water. Beneath the faucet, he cupped his hands and rinsed the aftertaste of rye and fries from his mouth. The rye didn't appeal to the younger guys. Of course, they would have preferred beer, or sweeter wines or liquors. Adam had been like that, too, as a teenager—experimenting with cheap, sweet wines like Cold Duck or Manischewitz, or sugary mixed cocktails—his favorites were White Russians and Singapore Slings. Rye was an old-fashioned old-man's drink. Adam's father had often chugged an iced tumbler of rye after work, scowling as he swallowed it as if it were medicine. His father had been a no-nonsense sort of man; a working-class fellow who lucked into a white collar job and fretted about it; he had not held high hopes for his son. As a boy, Adam had shown little interest in sports; instead, he preferred to join his mother at church. He wanted to learn to play the piano, which had clearly distressed his dad. Whether or not this had driven his father to drink, or drink more, Adam didn't know. He could only suppose. But it made Adam wish his father had lived long enough to see that he had become a doctor—and that he had exercised and sweated and pumped and lifted to get exactly the kind of an adult, grown-up body an all-star athlete was supposed to have.

In the mirror Adam thought he looked happy—*no, hell, he was happy*. Here he was solvent, money in the bank, healthy, drunk, free from the hospital for a few hours, free of Jesse, and spending time with two younger men. He wobbled over to the urinal, feeling the

need to piss—the reason why he had headed into the restroom in the first place. He let out a long, steady stream, amazed that his bladder and kidneys were retaining this much liquid. He shook out the last drops and was aroused, the blood rushing into his thickening cock. He thought of his happiness again, his good fortune to be spending the day with younger guys. *Guys who still had dreams and goals ahead of them.* Adam felt younger and special. He absent-mindedly stroked himself.

He was alone in the restroom—the door of the toilet stall was open when he walked in and there was only one other urinal. He was thrilled at exposing himself publicly, even if there was no one around to witness it. He groped and squeezed the head of his cock to intensify the pleasure. The door of the restroom was pushed open and a teenaged boy walked in. Adam was excited and ashamed of his behavior. He pushed and twisted his erection into his pants and zippered up.

The young man smelled of cigarettes. Like Adam, he was probably drinking while bowling. He stepped up easily to the urinal beside Adam. He was a tall fellow—about Adam's height—broad-shouldered and wearing an open shirt, so that Adam got a flash of skin and jewelry at his chest. Adam straightened and adjusted the crotch of his pants. The boy shifted uneasily at his side. Adam flushed the urinal and turned away.

Again at the mirror, Adam detected his own uneasiness. This wasn't the steam room of his former Chelsea gym. This wasn't his own bathroom. He was in the urine-stained toilet of a bowling alley in working-class Pennsylvania, the kind of place where guys like himself were easily beaten up by the young man now pissing at the urinal if the wrong sort of signals were passed between them. In the mirror Adam could see the back of the young man's head. One of his ears was pierced with a stud. A bracelet hung at the wrist of the hand he looped through a belt loop of his jeans as he stood and pissed. Ironic, Adam thought, that in his lifetime he had seen the stereotypical gay man morph from a limp-wristed jewelry-clad twig into a hairy muscled beast, while straight men adopted the former attire of the sexually flamboyant, flashy tight-fitting clothes

and jewels to give themselves distinction.

This didn't make him feel any easier in the young man's presence. A string of brutal news accounts flashed through his memory—Matthew Shepard, beaten and left to die. Barry Winchell, beaten by his fellow servicemen. Allen Schindler, beaten by his shipmates in a toilet such as this. This was the land of Bible schools and baseball diamonds. At the hospital, Adam counseled teenagers—young, straight boys—about homophobic behavior. "What made you think he was a threat to you?" Adam would ask in a session.

"The way he looked at me," one would answer. Or "I got the wrong vibe," another would tell him. "He gave me the creeps," another said.

Fear could often have violent consequences. Fear of the uncertain. The unknown. Of someone different. The only way this would change was if society changed. Adam doubted that he had little impact other than bringing to the surface several boy's own homosexual tendencies—usually to the displeasure of everyone involved—parents, staff, and patient.

What made him think that this young man standing behind him—or hell, even the two young men he had just shook hands with for a business deal—were any different from these sorts of guys? What did they really think? What *would* they think of him if they knew he found them attractive? That he wanted from them exactly what they feared?

He smelled the sweat and grease rising up from his clothes. He bent over the sink until he knew he could move to the toilet. In the stall, he managed to fall to his knees as the nausea moved up his throat and he vomited. He coughed and retched and spat when he was done to remove the aftertaste and bits of food and phlegm from his mouth. Then he vomited again, his stomach muscles tensed and tight, as if he knew he were about to be punched.

* * *

Jesse woke with an erection. It stretched up his stomach and burned his skin. He had been dreaming about Spider-Man, or Superboy,

he couldn't remember which—in the dream he had been running through the city—the Village—yes, West Tenth Street—his old neighborhood—and Spider-Boy, yes that was who it was, Spider-Boy, not Spider-Man, was watching him from the roof of a brownstone, swinging through the air on his way to save him from going out on another disastrous date. Spider-Boy was intent on rescuing him. Jesse was the guy he had been searching for to fall in love.

He smiled, laughed at the ridiculous scenario. It played again in his mind and the pleasure stretched at his groin. He rubbed and twisted his crotch against the bedspread. Spider-Boy told him that his best features were exactly right for a boyfriend—beautiful curly brown hair, deep, soulful eyes, an infectious smile that he wanted to kiss. Jesse wanted to grope himself, make the pleasure more pleasurable, but he swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood up. He wanted to keep an edginess going—an intentional randiness he might use to meet a guy before the end of the day.

In the bathroom he rinsed his face and straightened the sleep out of his hair. He felt more assured, relaxed, and confident. At the mirror beside the elevator he found himself handsome and optimistic. *Who could resist such a wonderful person?* he thought. *Why wouldn't a superhero want someone like me?*

Outside, in midtown, it was rush hour, the traffic stalled and vibrating with tension. Crosswalks were jammed with pedestrians aggressively striding to reach bus stops and subway entrances. Jesse refused to let this bother him. He headed uptown, against the flow of commuters, jockeying and pushing to create his own path.

The sun had set, though the light in the sky had not yet disappeared, an amber glow painted the top floors of the buildings on Third Avenue. Jesse wasn't hungry yet—he was still full from the lunch he had had with Stuart. The nap had worn off the effects of the martini. It was now a more acceptable hour for a cocktail—happy hour all over the town. He was headed to a bar on Fifty-Ninth Street where he knew he could find a copy of a gay nightlife guide. He wanted to check the listings for ideas to do later—maybe get a ticket for a show if there was no one around he wanted to meet—or get to know better.

There were three rooms to this bar—a narrow bar at the entry, a larger room beyond it with another bar and a baby grand piano where a heavyset fellow played show tunes, and a dark, downstairs bar with banquettes and more intimate seating. Jesse had been coming to this bar for years on his trips to the city—it catered to an older, more mature crowd, those gay men like himself who had given up on discos and sex clubs. It seemed like another lifetime since the last time he had been out dancing—dancing, really dancing, with other gay men—that shaking and twisting and pumping and primping. Dancing in a huge, awesome room with dramatic swirls of flashing and spinning lights, the music thumping and deafening, his hearing clogged for hours afterwards. It seemed like such a childish and foolish concept to him now—*dancing*. Even as a young man, he'd never had the confidence to take a whiff of poppers and rip off his shirt and follow a set of friends to the dance floor. He'd never been part of the Fire Island crowd, a gym rat and disco bunny going from dance to dance. He was too old to become a circuit boy. But it had been a deep desire—to be like these men. To feel like he belonged to a club, to be part of a tribe, to share a communal experience. He was still drawn to the idea of such a thing, even though he knew he would never follow through with the execution of it—unless, of course, he was escorted by a beautiful young man who had no desire to abandon him, to lead him exactly into this sort of life. (*Fat chance*, he thought, waiting for the bartender to approach him, it would be easier to shed ten pounds on the South Beach diet and drinking "skinny water" than to have a hot shirtless boyfriend leading him onto a dance floor.)

Jesse ordered a martini (dry, with vermouth and olives and an extra glass of ice). The bartender was a dark-haired handsome guy with a two-day-old stubble. If things were slow, Jesse could flirt with him later. Some bartenders could be a willing ear. Or a captive audience.

He sat on a stool and thumbed through the pages of the nightlife guide he had picked up beside the door. There was barely enough light to read the tiny print of the listings. Jesse held the pages close to his eyes and squinted, wondering if it was time he should begin

traveling with one of those credit-card-sized devices that light up and magnify those hard-to-see items in dimly lit bars. He laughed at himself—and at the others around him—no one else was attempting to read the magazine—they were all waiting till later, till they were back in the apartments and bathrooms, turning on the bright lights and pulling out their bifocals so they could concentrate on what they were missing out on in the rest of the city. What the young guys were doing to get laid or where they were taking their boyfriends.

The advertisements were the easiest to see—large beautiful photographs of young muscled men—guys with six-pack abs and shaved chests and nipples so round they looked fake. Downtown, there was a gay German film showing at the Quad Cinema featuring a young, muscled boy. A few blocks away, on Sheridan Square, there was a drag queen doing a cabaret show based on Judy Garland. A bare chest contest was being held at a bar on Eighth Avenue and a leather contest was being held at another. Uptown, there was an exhibit of nude photography. A few blocks away from this bar, there were dancing Asian go-go boys. In the East Village, there was an underground comedy festival, and porn star appearances were scattered throughout several Village and Chelsea bars Jesse had never visited before—or, if he had, they had been remodeled and repainted and renamed in hopes of enticing a younger, more attractive crowd.

He flipped through the ads for escorts and masseurs—more photographs of young men, some headless, only a glistening torso. He glanced at his bar mates and thought, *no contest*—the air-brushed boys won all the time. Who wouldn't want what they were hawking? Tight flesh, good times, no commitment necessary. He finished his martini—so far it had no effect on him, even on an empty stomach—and he went through a small hallway and into the larger bar.

The pianist was playing "Corner of My Mind," from *Pippin.* An overweight man in an argyle-patterned sweater was singing a decent rendition of the song in a clear, tenor pitch. Jesse flashed back to the day he and his best friend Emily, then in high school, took the train up from New Jersey to see a Saturday matinee of the Broadway

show. It was his first trip to the city without a parent. Emily's mother had given them extra money for cabs so that they wouldn't need to take a subway. They had saved the money by walking uptown to the theater. After the show (which he had loved because he had already learned all the lyrics from playing the cast album over and over on his portable stereo), they ate at a deli, ordering double-decker sandwiches (corned beef and pastrami) and giant sodas (root beer and cola).

At Penn Station, while waiting for the next train home, Jesse had wandered off to a newsstand, hoping to find a comic book to read or the new issue of *After Dark,* his favorite magazine because it was all about the glamour of show business. In a back aisle he discovered racks of *Penthouse, Playboy,* and *Hustler.* Beside them was a magazine he had never seen before—*Playguy*. He broke out in a sweat, nervously darted his eyes to see who was around him, and lifted the magazine out of the rack. His heart beat wildly as he looked at the photos of gorgeous, undressed, nude, beautiful, handsome, breathtaking men. His hands shook; his feet were on fire; his mind was dizzy from a lack of air. *After Dark* was full of photographs of handsome, often shirtless young men—ballet dancers, actors, singers—but this, *this* magazine—*Playguy*—had photographs that showed everything Jesse had only imagined (even it if the photos weren't as colorful and as artistic). Somehow he had managed to buy the magazine, slipping it between current issues of *Sports Illustrated* and *Time*, using up the entire amount of his weekly allowance in the purchase. Years later he had felt the same guilty thrill when he had found the photographs from that issue of *Playguy* posted on a group page on the Internet. The sight of them had made him immediately dizzy.

He ordered another martini. The pianist and singer began a *My Fair Lady* medley. It was a sloppy misstep—the singer uncertain of the words or what song the pianist would begin next. After he tipped the bartender, Jesse glanced around the room, staking out his possibilities. There was a handsome man leaning against the doorway into the bar. Jesse must have passed by without noticing him. A group of young men were at the other end of the bar. He

studied these fellows closely—itemizing their clothes and shoes and haircuts and postures. One of the guys was Todd, the culinary salesman from Bloomingdale's. Jesse watched the way Todd interacted with his friends, the way he smiled and tilted his head when he talked, the dimples that formed at the sides of his lips, the way he held his chin slightly upward and how his hands clasped and clutched his friends' arms for emphasis. Jesse ached to know Todd better, to be part of that group and someone special to Todd.

He caught the bartender's attention—this one was not nearly as handsome as the first; he looked like he had been skipping his diet for more than a year and had a strange, spiky mistake going on with his thin, highlighted hair. Jesse told the bartender he wanted to buy the next drink for Todd, the young man at the other end of the bar. Maybe another drink might loosen Todd up for striking up a new friendship. Maybe his awkwardness before had only been from a customer-salesman dynamic.

The bartender was a weary-looking fellow. He gave Jesse a perturbed grin, a sort of "are you kidding, that young guy's not going to give you the time of day" look that made Jesse feel foolish. The bartender paced to the end of the counter and tapped Todd on the shoulder. Jesse pretended not to watch as the bartender explained to Todd that the "desperate, aging queen" at the other end of the bar wanted to buy him another drink.

There was an awkward moment as Todd shook his head "no" and looked down the bar at Jesse. The bartender persisted and set about fixing Todd another drink. Jesse watched the information play out amongst Todd's friends—their leaning into each other's faces and whispering, their appalled glances in Jesse's direction.

Jesse wished he had handled it differently—that he had walked over to Todd and his friends and said hello, without the dramatic flair of buying the younger man a drink. Jesse tipped the bartender when he returned. Todd broke away from his friends and approached Jesse.

"You shouldn't have," Todd said. "We're almost off to dinner."

"I wanted to thank you again for your help today," Jesse said. "And to wish you good luck in culinary school."

"No classes till Monday," Todd said coolly.

"So you're out sampling treats," Jesse said, trying to turn on his charm.

"Sampling?"

The revival of Todd's earlier reference fell flat. Jesse became clammy and sweaty from uneasiness. "Sampling, *you know*."

"Sure," Todd said, looking back at his friends. "Thanks for the drink."

"Any time," Jesse nodded, though Todd was out of earshot by the time he had uttered it. There was no invitation to join Todd and his friends for dinner, no introductions to meet Todd's friends. There was no exchange of phone numbers or questions of how often Jesse came to the city, nor did Todd even ask for Jesse's name. As Todd and his friends left the bar, Jesse tried not to let his disappointment show; he always felt that someday this sort of kindness would come back to him, that one day someone would buy him a drink, someone he had met before or who was a friend of a friend, someone would draw up a barstool and ask him to tell him the story of his life. And he would be just as smitten with Jesse as Jesse was with him.

Jesse lingered behind, sipping the last drops of his martini, now a bit lightheaded from the alcohol. The piano player was performing songs from *West Side Story.* A tall man who might have been handsome forty years before sang a serious rendition of "Somewhere." *Probably an actor*, Jesse thought, *or someone who had wanted to be an actor but needed to make a better income to remain in the city.* Jesse finished his martini, and went to take a leak in the restroom, overhearing one guy say to another that he would never wait "in one of those lines to get in." Jesse thought they must be talking about some kind of club. He looked at his watch. He had plenty of time for another drink, in case he wanted to see the early performance of the Garland cabaret show. He splashed some water on his face, patted it dry, and headed to the downstairs bar.

There was a larger crowd downstairs. Jesse ordered his third martini from a bartender with muttonchop sideburns and a tattoo on his inner forearm. Disappointment washed over him again—he was too old to belong to the younger generation. After all these years

of being out and gay, he was still looking for a decent boyfriend at a gay bar. ("A big mistake," Clay had advised him. "Never look for love in a bar.") He remembered the thrill of those first months with Adam, overtaken by love and the belief that he would never have to step foot into another gay bar to search for a Mr. Right or a Mr. Right Now.

Jesse knew the disappointment of not being someone's type. He wasn't a twink or a muscle bear or a leatherman or a Calvin Klein model. He would never be pursued for the size of his arms or chest or cock (all of which were modestly "average"). Clay—Clay, Clay, Clay, did he ever miss Clay—had advised that he should dress like the kind of guy he wanted to meet. But Jesse looked silly in a flannel shirt, silly in a tweed jacket, even sillier in cargo pants and a tight T. (His fashion sense was average—solid colors instead of patterns, styles chosen for comfort and camouflage—and this made his efforts to be noticed and appealing more dramatic.)

The martini was strong. Jesse leaned against a column which divided the room. It was a good location—there was a thin shelf where he could rest his glass and he could see the men entering and leaving the room. He was content with the parade for a while—a guy would stumble in, cruise the room, circle a bit, then leave to take the stairs back upstairs. The music on the sound system shifted to a song by Linda Ronstadt—one of those old chestnuts she had recorded with a full-sized orchestra. Jesse was thrown back into another memory of going to her concert at Radio City with Adam. They had turned it into a special occasion, dressing up in black tie and dining afterwards at the Rainbow Room. The memory made him ache to feel like that again. Young. Handsome. In love.

At the doorway, Jesse saw a cute guy leaning against the frame, looking in Jesse's direction. He was a tightly built young fellow, dark hair and a dark stubble, dressed in a blue polo shirt and jeans, both of which showed off the compactness of his body.

Instinctively, Jesse knew the guy was a hustler—there was a history of young men showing up to find sugar daddies at this bar, the management overlooking the younger trade because it meant a bigger crowd and more money being spent by elderly gentlemen hoping to snare a gorgeous catch for the night. Years ago, Jesse and

Clay had gone to a bar not far from here. Clay had been wooed in such a way by an older man—to the delight of Clay and the shock of Jesse. "The whole block is a pick-up spot," Clay told Jesse. They went outside where Clay pointed out drivers in cars slowing down for potential hook-ups. Clay had abandoned Jesse, jumping into the first car that had slowed for him, waving good-bye to a dumbfounded Jesse. Jesse had always been amazed that he had inhabited a different gay universe than Clay. Jesse had walked to First Avenue to catch a cab home, when a car slowed beside him. A man in the backseat leaned out the window and yelled, "Jesse?"

It was Gene, a set designer Jesse had met while working in the box office of a summer stock theater his sophomore year in college. Gene had taken a big interest in Jesse, which Jesse had not reciprocated. He had been intimidated by Gene's age and height and bulk, not to mention the gossip that had swirled around Gene—*leather queen, chains, slings, and harnesses*. Delighted to find a familiar face on First Avenue that late at night, however, and thinking this would be an adventure that he could retell to Clay, Jesse had jumped into the backseat of the car beside Gene, only to find three other men who looked just like Gene—heavy, older, bearded, and dressed in leather. They wanted Jesse to come back to New Jersey with them. Scared and intimidated, Jesse had concocted a story about meeting a new boyfriend in the East Village. Reluctantly, they dropped him off on Thirty-Fourth Street. Years later, taking Adam to the summer stock theater to see a friend of a friend in a production of *A Little Night Music*, Jesse had learned that Gene was dead, stabbed to death after picking up a hustler.

Jesse nodded and smiled at the cute fellow at the doorway. He sipped the last drops of his martini. On his path toward the bar and the bartender, Jesse stopped and introduced himself and asked the cute guy if he could buy him a drink. This time he was not rebuffed. When he returned with another martini and a beer for "Nico," they sat together at a banquette.

They were instantly intimate, holding hands and weaving their fingers together. Jesse asked, "You come here often?"

"Not much," Nico said, darting his eyes out into the dim room.

There was a slight nervousness to the young man, which made Jesse believe that Nico had not been hustling for long. Jesse found this endearing. "Where do you hang out?" Jesse asked. "You have a favorite place?"

"No place special."

"I bet you make it special," Jesse said, complimenting his new friend. Nico seemed even younger and more inexperienced to Jesse since he was the one doing all the flattering. He wanted nothing more than to kiss the boy, to feel that rough stubble and youthful passion burning and chapping his lips. He hoped that Nico was a kisser, not one of those guys who shunned that sort of intimacy. He rubbed his hand along Nico's bare arm—it was covered with dark, silky hair like fur. "Can I bring you back to my place?" Jesse asked.

There was a slight hesitancy as Jesse knew that he was forcing Nico into revealing his profession and fees, so he added, "I'll make it worth your while. Whatever it's worth."

This did the trick. Nico nodded. Jesse took the last sip of martini and they headed toward the exit. Nico was behind him, puppy-like, and this was what made Jesse smile, believing his trip to the city was worthwhile, after all. Luck and happiness were finally on his side.

* * *

The headache was his savior.

Adam was dehydrated. He ordered a bottled water and told Shane he was calling a taxi to take him home.

"No need to, Doc," Shane said. "I'll drive you home myself."

Shane had not had any alcohol except for the small taste of rye. "Better not," Adam said, struggling to match the words in his mind with the words coming out of his mouth. "Not on the bike."

"We'll take Paul's car," Shane said. "He won't mind. He owes me a few favors."

Adam followed Shane to the small office off the lobby where Paul had retreated, moving between the giddiness of being drunk and the sting of feeling ill. The bowling alley was crowded and noisy;

the Friday night teams had arrived and were settled into their games and challenges.

Paul tossed Shane the keys to his car and said, "'Night, Doc. Talk to you later."

Outside in the parking lot, Adam felt old and parental, like a man who had been playing hooky all day long and was suddenly presented with a whopping bill to pay, and yet sick and miserable as a little boy. The more he now stood upright, the more wobbly he felt. He was ready to call it a day, ready to sleep it all off.

When they reached Paul's car—a gray hatchback that Adam would have rolled his eyes at as a bad investment if he were sober—he told Shane that he wanted to lie down in the back seat.

"Sure, Doc, whatever makes you feel better."

He felt foolish the moment he lay down and stretched his legs out across the seat, but it was good to be off his feet for a few minutes. He twisted his shoulders and rolled down the window for some fresh air, and said to Shane, "You know how to get there?"

"Sure do. 'Bout everybody knows that big ole house you bought."

The sound of a noisy, metal guitar solo jumped through car when Shane turned the ignition key. "He likes that Berlin shit," Shane said. "I'm telling ya, Doc. You're gonna love that system I got ya. You're never gonna listen to music the same way again."

Adam closed his eyes. The cool autumn air blew in through the open window and across his body, flapping through his shirt and slacks and airing out the stale smell of the bowling alley and the alcohol. The chill fed the headache, but the wobbly ride and Adam's dizzy vulnerability made him aroused again, the blood rushing away from his brain to his cock. He imagined Shane pulling over to the side of the road and begging, "Come on, Doc. Just a quickie before you get home."

Adam was asleep when they reached his house. Shane roused him from the back seat with a tug. The windows of the house were dark, which meant that Jesse had not returned from the city.

"Dry cleaning," Adam said to Shane. "Today it started because of dry cleaning."

"If you say so," Shane answered him.

As he stood, Adam seemed to be both more drunk and more sober, as if his muscles and his brain were not cohabiting the same physical frame. Shane stood close to him, as if waiting to catch Adam if he should stumble. Adam felt his heart warm and his eyes well up with tears. Right now at this moment he loved Shane more than anyone else in the world. And he believed that this love was reciprocated.

"Can you make it inside?" Shane asked. There was a tentativeness to his voice, as if he were ready to leave, but knowing he shouldn't, not yet.

"Want to come inside for a drink?" Adam asked him.

"Better not, Doc. Can't afford to lose my license."

Adam found the house key he had removed from his key chain when the mechanic had driven off with the Porsche.

"Come inside to snoop," Adam said. "Look at the art. Jesse's not here to harass us. I won't bite. Too tired to bite. I just want to crash."

Adam didn't wait for a response; he turned and walked along the flagstone path that led to his front door. Jason, their gardener, had built a small brook that ran beneath the stones, the banks lush with plants and flowers and shrubs Adam did not know the names of. It was a costly landscaping project—and he tried to imagine Shane seeing it all for the first time—the explosion of reeds on one side, the moss and lichen covering the stones, the water tumbling from the large stone fountain and into the brook.

Adam unlocked the door and keyed in the code to disarm the burglar alarm. Shane had followed him inside. "If you're hungry, eat whatever you want."

Shane seemed timid and boyish. Adam didn't change his tactic. He was thoroughly exhausted. He walked into the kitchen, found a painkiller, drew himself a glass of water, and swallowed the pill. Shane tagged behind him, but stood outside of the lights of the kitchen, as if he were voyeur. Or a burglar.

Adam did not let fear or temptation direct him. "Go ahead, look around," he said. "This place is like a museum. I've got one of

the Hudson River School paintings in the dining room. Nobody appreciates it like me. I've got a boyfriend who thinks Judy Garland should be canonized."

He laughed at the ridiculous image of Jesse in his mind, and at the realization that he had lured Shane inside and did not have a shred of desire to bed him. The headache washed back to the surface of his skull. He went into the small den that was off to the side of the kitchen and lay down on the sofa, lifting the remote on the coffee table to flick on the television. Again, for a brief moment, he tried to imagine what Shane saw as he moved through the house—the antique wash stand, the wicker baskets, the framed quilt in the hallway which was almost two hundred years old. And for a moment, he did not let his professional training escape him. The true test of a person's character was to put him into a foreign situation and see how he would react. If Shane stole from him—stole the Grecian vase or the Venetian glass bowl or the brass mantel clock he had bought on a trip to Switzerland, then he would know not to trust him. That business together would not be worth the investment. Once a thief, always a thief. Now, then, or later.

Adam was asleep before he settled on a channel. He had no idea where Shane had wandered to in the house, or, in fact, if he was still inside it.

* * *

Three years before, at the age of forty-six, Jesse hired his first hustler. He had overplanned the encounter, getting his hair cut and his back waxed, before checking into the Dorset and ordering hors d'oeuvres and wine from room service. He had picked the hustler because of his ad: A photograph of a glistening, chiseled torso with the caption: "Hot European, New in Town. Sensual and Hung. Masculine and Muscled. Your fantasies come true."

The guy—Danek, a pale-skinned boy with bad teeth—arrived two hours late. Jesse was drunk from the wine and Danek could not get an erection. He complained when Jesse refused to tip him. "For what? I did all the work myself!"

Over the last three years, Jesse's success rate was less than stellar. Of the twelve other guys he had hired—from ads or ratings from an Internet site, he'd been disappointed by all of them. Jake showed up on time but gave a lousy massage. Alex promised he was versatile, which meant he did nothing. Juan's body was a turn-off. ("No, I don't want you to flex and pose.") Tino wasn't tiny, but he also wasn't charming. ("What do you mean you don't kiss? Your name is Valentino!")

On the sidewalk, Jesse grew skeptical. Away from the bar, Nico was sullen, rougher, unable to maintain a conversation. Or was it sobriety knocking open Jesse's disillusionment?

Jesse hailed a cab. In the backseat, Nico was more responsive, softer, their hands and fingers entwining as the city blurred past the windows and a cool breeze poured in through the crack of the window. Jesse attempted a bit of small talk, "What part of the city do you live in?" "Are you originally from New York?" As Nico answered, "the Bronx," both times, Jesse detected that nasal, testosterone-filled native accent which had charmed him at the bar. Jesse was in love. *A working-class boy*, he thought, taking in Nico's jeans and his rough fingers. In all of Jesse's years of living and visiting the city, he had never spent time in the Bronx, only driven through it to reach some other place. The notion that he had found a local guy—a young, native New Yorker for the night, thrilled him. He calculated how much money he had in his wallet and how much tip he might give Nico, even if he probably couldn't convince the young man to stay for the entire evening.

In the lobby of the hotel Jesse expected to meet the scornful glance of the doorman or the attendant on duty at the reservations desk, but they both ignored him and Nico. *These sorts of things go on all over the city,* Jesse thought. This wasn't the first hustler Jesse had invited here. For all the clerk or the bellboy knew, Nico could be Jesse's brother or cousin, or God forbid, nephew or son.

Jesse contained his enthusiasm and good fortune of finding Nico. He inserted his card key into his door and motioned Nico to enter.

Inside the room, everything changed swiftly.

It was as if a gunshot had been fired. Nico shoved Jesse against the wall. A knife was suddenly at Jesse's chest. Jesse's heart was beating so loudly he couldn't hear himself think.

At first, he wasn't sure how to react. Was this were part of the hustle? Some sort of role-playing? Nico's sneer was magnetic—his teeth beautifully white and even, the stubble in a heavier pattern at his chin and upper lip, the eyebrows thick and even as if they had been groomed and oiled to draw attention.

Nico demanded to see Jesse's wallet. The hoarse "Let me see it, *now*" purged Jesse's last remaining shred of luck. And zeal.

In the bright, glaring light of the hotel room, Jesse saw the glint of the knife, then the dark circles beneath Nico's darting eyes. Jesse was in trouble. *Real trouble.* He reached into his back pocket and withdrew his wallet, saying, in a soft, pleading whisper, "Here, take it all. Please don't hurt me. Just don't hurt me."

Nico grabbed the wallet and pushed Jesse onto the mattress of the bed. Jesse still wasn't sure if this was part of a game—part of Nico's plan of seduction. He was motionless as Nico—knife in one hand—lifted the cash out of Jesse's wallet. Nico wasn't interested in the credit cards—only cash. Cash was all the young man wanted. Not sex. Not punishment or revenge or retaliation. Only *cash*. But it didn't ease Jesse's fear. One misstep, one mishap could change it all. How could someone with such beautiful genetics become this hateful person? Jesse had an urge to ask, "Why?" *Why are you doing this? What has gone wrong?* But he didn't. He stayed still. And silent.

And then Nico went through the credit cards.

"Don't think about calling the cops or the front desk," Nico said, his fingers shuffling the cards as if he were about to perform a trick. He lifted up Jesse's driver's license and read it out loud, "Jesse Berger, 360 Chester Road, Warner Township, Pennsylvania. I know who you are. Anyone tries to stop me when I leave this building, somebody will come for you. Got that?"

Nico tossed the wallet and the cards back at Jesse, hitting him on the chest. The cards scattered to the floor. "*Got that?*" Nico repeated in a louder voice.

"Yes," Jesse answered, letting the *ssss* sound draw out tentatively. His heart was pounding in his ears. He could not hear his own voice. For a moment, his eyes flicked away from Nico as his credit cards landed on the carpet.

Nico stepped backwards through the room, his eyes never leaving Jesse. Jesse still expected it to be a hoax, that Nico would put away the knife—a switchblade—smile big and wide and say something boyish, like, "I really had you goin', dude, didn't I?"

But he didn't.

The knife disappeared into the front pocket of Nico's jacket. The young man was gone, suddenly out of the room.

Jesse stayed stiff and motionless for a long time. His eyes shifted to the doorway and then to the contents of his wallet at his feet. His mind raced through unanswered questions and worst-case scenarios. What if he had been stabbed? What if he were bleeding? How long would it take for someone to find him? What if the wounds had been fatal?

How had he let this happen? How could he not have known that Nico was only out to rob him? That sex was not going to be a part of the adventure? How could he have misjudged someone? Or was he always such a fool? Such a poor judge of character?

There was no way Jesse was going to report this to the front desk or call the police and report a robbery. It would only force him through one embarrassment after the next. Yes, Officer, I am a homosexual with a lover of twenty-four years who hasn't touched me in more than five years. What would *you* do? How could *you* survive without any affection in your life? Where would *you* go to find one millisecond of intimacy?

Jesse gathered up his credit cards from the floor. He imagined the news finding its way to Adam. He'd answer the phone, say, Yes, of course, I know who Jesse Berger is. *Was*. Adam's heart might give a little startle at the news. Jesse? *Dead?* As Adam asked how it had happened, the realization that he was rid of Jesse would make him happy. *Too happy*. He'd smile, grateful that a strung-out kid had done what he had not been able to do himself. He'd pretend his way through the grief and condolences. Then it would hit him one day. One day

on the toilet when he ran out of toilet paper Adam would realize just how much Jesse had done for him. The laundry would be stinking and piling up. The bugs would be crawling out of the sink to pick at the crusts of dried food on the dirty dishes. He'd never be able to drive the Porsche because the keys would be lost, beneath a wave of dust.

Jesse felt a choking sob begin in his chest and lodge in his throat, then a mournful sob broke open. Adam would miss him. He would miss Adam. Jesse knew he was lucky to be alive. Lucky to be walking away with only his dignity and a few hundred dollars gone from his wallet.

* * *

There was the time Jesse had been riding his bike on the west side of the city, near the piers, and a bus had pulled out in front of him, unaware of his presence. There was the time he had been trapped in the elevator at work—only a twenty-minute ordeal, but it had made him nervous and edgy every time he rode the elevator again. There was the night, almost two years before, when he and Adam had driven to see a concert in Philadelphia—a friend performing with the Philly Pops—and on the late-night drive back to the house they had narrowly missed a young kid driving through a red light who had crashed his car into the anxious driver behind them.

Jesse took all these encounters as a means to feel grateful. His number had been spared. God had other plans for him. But what was he to learn from this one? To be more cautious? Hibernate? Hide from the world? Be *celibate*?

He rattled the shock from his mind by stretching, washing his face in the bathroom, turning on the television. His restlessness returned. He needed to get out of the room. He had no desire to see a cabaret show or a movie—and the television wasn't distracting him from his near brush with death.

He put on his jacket but paced around the room. He decided to check out of the hotel. He wanted to be home. In his house, in his bed, asleep and safe. He checked his watch. If he left now, he could catch the bus back to Pennsylvania.

In the hotel lobby he turned in his room key and used the ATM to get cash. On the sidewalk he steeled himself and outmaneuvered a young couple trying to catch a cab. At the Port Authority, he was the last one to board the bus to Pennsylvania. The bus was less than half-full. Jesse felt like a refugee, fleeing to find a better life. He always had an unsettling sensation when the bus lurched from the dark bay of the station toward the illuminated dirty tiles of the Lincoln Tunnel, as though he had forgotten something important he would never have the chance to retrieve.

The bus recklessly climbed the highway ramps out of the tunnel, the driver taking the curves too fast. Jesse pumped his foot to the floor as if he could slow and brake the speed. Then the bus turned west and the road straightened. Jesse's face relaxed, his body eased itself down into the curve of the seat. Time stretched out and became slower, something it never did in the city.

Calmer, Jesse laid out a plan to pursue—he would go home, forget about the unfortunate encounter with Nico. *It was just one of those things, one of those things of living in the city and trying to connect with a stranger. Bad luck. Poor karma. Misjudgment. An unfortunate occurrence.* Gradually, he began to think of other things—groceries which were needed for the party tomorrow night for Matt and Peter, a haircut in a few days, the dentist next week. Twenty minutes out of the city Jesse was asleep, rising into consciousness from a dream about losing his wallet as the bus jostled or swayed or the sound of his own snoring disturbed him.

Jesse's first thought, when he discovered the parking ticket on the windshield of the Saab, was that it was cheaper to pay the fine than to contest it. He folded the ticket and slipped it into his pocket. He fumbled with his car keys in the dark—thank God he had not had to empty his pockets for Nico. Thank God he hadn't had to give up his watch or his car keys. He had opened the car door when he noticed the flat front tire.

He cursed and shut the door. He found the key to the trunk and was at the back of the car when he noticed another tire was flat. He checked the two tires on the other side of the car. They were flat, too. He let out a sigh and held in a scream. He was pissed. He was

miserable and hysterical, on the verge of a breakdown, too exhausted for the effort of shedding tears. He was so tired that the string of expletives he wanted to shout only tickered across his brain.

He found his Triple A card in his wallet and used his cellphone to reach the car service. Four flat tires. All four. Flat at the same time. This wasn't a rotten circumstance or another piece of bad luck. *No, this was sabotage*. This was planned. On purpose. Someone being malicious. And spiteful. There was only one person who would do this to him. Only one person to blame—*Adam*. This was Adam's retaliation. His revenge for the Porsche not working.

Next Jesse called the house. Adam did not answer. Jesse left a polite message, "Adam, dearest, my car has four flat tires! Can you believe that! All four went flat at the exact same time. I was wondering if you were around to pick me up. Ooops, that's right—*your* car is not working either. What a bummer! I guess I'll wait for the tow service and take a cab home. I hope I see you later. I've missed you all day long, honey bee."

Jesse called Adam's cellphone, where he left a similar polite and controlled message. He would exact his revenge at a later date—something so heinous and wicked that Adam would never forgive him. They would be forced to divest their interests. It would be the beginning of the end. No more Mr. Nice Guy. War had been officially declared.

And then he began to cry.

* * *

Sometimes their fights were not vocal arguments, but deliberate acts of provocation and retaliation. Once, Jesse had intentionally vacuumed Adam's expensive hand-hooked antique rug. The vacuum cleaner tore it into shreds. Jesse was mad that Adam had used Jesse's credit card to purchase a new painting, telling him it was only a temporary loan because Adam's own card was over limit. Adam had forgotten about the "temporary" part and Jesse's card was rejected at the grocery store where he went twice a week to shop for food for Adam's meals, an experience he described to Adam as

unnecessarily humiliating. Adam responded by cutting a hole in the sleeve of Jesse's blazer, the only jacket Jesse could still fit into. Jesse discovered the hole the night they were going out to dinner with Matt and Peter. At the restaurant, Jesse "accidentally" spilled a glass of red wine on Adam's pants. "Whoops," Jesse said. "Guess you have to take those to the cleaners, huh?" Adam retaliated by dumping his chocolate mousse dessert in Jesse's lap.

There had been a fight in the Madrid airport over coffee (Adam wanted skim milk and Jesse had given him cream), a fight about window treatments in the living room (Jesse wanted patterned drapes, but Adam had hired a designer to create fabric-covered shades that could not be moved up or down), a fight over Jesse's nephew's bar mitzvah present (which Adam had refused to discuss because he couldn't attend the ceremony due to a speaking commitment at a medical conference in San Francisco). There was a smashed cellphone at the Metropolitan Opera House, a hurled pork chop in a restaurant in Lambertville, and taunts with butter knives, toothbrushes, and screwdrivers.

And there were fights about the fights.

"Why are you acting this way?"

"What way?"

"Mean."

"You haven't seen mean yet."

"I'm not living with a dictator."

"A dictator might be more fun."

Adam refused to seek counseling for his anger issues, aware, however, of his self-diagnosis: conflict-seeking behavior, spousal attention deficit disorder, lack of intimacy, and a repressed desire for personal space. Jesse admitted to being obsessive and impulsive with narcissistic tendencies, but he would never confess to poor communication skills. "You can't stop me from telling things the way they are," he told his partner.

"I can still ignore you," Adam answered. "And I know how much that annoys you."

* * *

Adam was deep in a dream when the phone rang. He had been working out in a new gym—not really a gym, but a basement, a basement in a Manhattan brownstone with a narrow staircase that led to a separate floor set up with free weights—barbells and dumbbells and weight benches and stools. In the dream he hadn't really been exercising. No, he had been exploring the different floors, not really witnessing men exercising or having sex in dark rooms or cubicles but conscious of it happening everywhere around him. In a basement floor there was a large pool and a showering area. He was walking around without a towel around his waist in search of an unused faucet.

The phone stirred his consciousness. He lifted himself through a rapid series of uncertainties about the location of the gym—was it on the street where he had lived in the Village, or was it in Chelsea, or somewhere else, behind another building?

The phone rang again. He woke. On the television, David Letterman was sitting behind a desk and tapping a pencil. There was a cut to a band member and a quick transition to a commercial. The sound was down low; he could barely hear the singing voice-over of the commercial. He couldn't remember adjusting the volume when he had lain down on the couch. The phone rang again. Adam heard the buckle of the wood flooring in the dining room, as if someone had stopped to listen to the phone ring and shifted his weight in anticipation of being caught and running out of the house.

The sensation disturbed Adam. The phone rang once more, this time frightening him. He heard his heart beating in his head. He lifted his feet off the end of the couch and stood up. He had the sudden impression that someone was watching him. The headache floated back to his consciousness. He remembered inviting Shane into the house. Did he leave?

The phone rang again and went silent—the voicemail system activated. Adam's throat was dry and scratchy.

He stepped into the doorway. The darkened dining room was empty, the glow of the exterior house light shining through the window. He went into the dark room. Nothing seemed missing or out of place. Through the window he saw the driveway. No car. Not

Shane's. Or Jesse's.

He went into the kitchen and ran a glass of water from the shelf in the refrigerator. The cold liquid softened his throat but fed his headache. He left the glass in the sink and returned to the sofa. He thought about turning the television off and going upstairs to bed, but a loneliness hovered over him and he remained downstairs.

When the phone rang again, Adam was sleeping. This time Adam did not abandon his dream. He owned a motorcycle but did not know how to get it started. He had a key but it wouldn't work.

* * *

The tow truck arrived an hour later to take the Saab to a tire dealership. It would be at least another day before it would be repaired—new tires installed, rotated, and balanced. Jesse caught a ride with the driver to the dealership where he called the house and Adam's cellphone again.

Adam did not answer either call. Jesse withdrew cash from a grease-stained ATM machine in the scuffed and bare, fluorescent-lit waiting area. He called a taxi service to take him to the house.

The taxi driver missed the turn off at Raubsville, and Jesse directed him toward Stouts Valley and the old schoolhouse. The windows of the houses along the road were squares of yellow light, gauzy curtains floating in the warm breeze. For no good reason Jesse was reminded of the bike rides he and Adam used to take through the county, slowing down as they approached a house that intrigued them, wondering what kind of décor was inside, what kind of renovations had been done to make an old stone cottage modern and livable. He found a sweet-sad nostalgia pressing against his chest as they passed by, one after the next, just as he could sometimes look back at his life with Adam, year after year, searching out the good times they had shared and not remembering their bad moments.

But he never really forgot those bad moments. Or the fights. Those fuzzy, nostalgic moments did not last for long.

It was after midnight when the taxi pulled into the driveway of

the house. Through the front windows Jesse could see the television screen flickering. He paid the driver and unlocked the back door, stepping on a leaf of an imported blooming plant Adam had paid the gardener to find and smashing it into the stone with the toe of his shoe.

In the small den beside the kitchen Adam was passed out on the couch, his face turned away from the television and buried into the back pillows.

For a moment Jesse thought about exacting his revenge right then and there—throwing a glass of cold water on Adam's head or dousing him with the fire extinguisher that was under the sink. He thought about taking a carving knife and walking through the rooms of the house, slashing and vandalizing Adam's precious art collection—that would show him. That would get him furious. But it was too obvious and hideous. And in the end, it would be Jesse who looked more childish than Adam. Jesse wanted something more wicked and premeditated—something shocking and lasting and sure to be a turning point. Just like the tires.

He walked over to the television set and turned it off, flicked off the lamps and the kitchen lights, turned off the exterior house lights, and enabled the burglar alarm.

Exhaustion overcame him as he mounted the stairs. He could feel the heaviness in his eyes, his brain screaming to shut down. He was too tired to feel miserable over the mugging. He was too tired to plan his revenge. But he would find it someday and set it in motion. His determination was certain. He wouldn't forget this.

In the bathroom, he took a sleeping pill, even though he did not need it. He lay on the bed without undressing, his shoes still on, something he was certain would annoy Adam. Maybe in the night Jesse would roll over and kick his lover. Or partner. Or significant other. Or roommate. Or lover. Whoever he was. Whatever he was. And if Adam was there and showed he was upset, it would show that he still cared. Or not. In fact, it might show they both cared nothing at all.

Saturday

Adam woke clammy and disoriented, a razor blade of morning light streaming in from the window slicing his hand where he clutched the quilted pillow he had bought years before at a craft fair in Lancaster. He shifted his eyes to the tiny numerals on the brass clock on the fireplace mantel, but his head would not accommodate the small movement without a flare of pain above his right eye. The pain—the brightening of a headache—unleashed the uncertainty in his stomach—and he swung his legs to the floor and bowed his head toward his knees to squash the rising nausea.

Regret hit him immediately. The rye. The burger. The fries. He saw the television was off. The remote was on the coffee table. Jesse must have come back. Or did Shane never leave?

He winced into the kitchen, turning on the water, reaching for a glass, finding a painkiller, and starting the coffee maker. Sweat dampened the collar of the shirt he had slept in. The time was after eight—he had slept undisturbed through the night—a rarity because of Jesse's tossing and snoring. Adam wondered why he did not feel more rested. He couldn't hear if Jesse was awake and upstairs, the headache preventing him from detecting anything other than its flashing cry for relief. Outside, the bright yellow leaves of the black walnut at the top of the slope of the backyard caught his attention. There was no car in the driveway. Maybe Jesse had stayed in the city. Then Adam remembered the Saab at the parking lot of the bus station, the motorcycle ride, the tattoo parlor, and the bowling alley. What had he been thinking of? A new car stereo? A business with two teenagers? A microbrewery? Why hadn't he just got a tattoo and called it a day?

The coffee smelled delicious, but it churned in his stomach after the first sip. He rinsed his face with cold water and dried it with a dish towel, hoping he would feel better. He took the coffee cup and went upstairs. Jesse was in bed, snoring as if he were in the midst of another argument. They had fought and fought over the snoring. Jesse could sleep undisturbed through Adam's snoring if he were medicated with a sleeping pill, but Adam refused to write himself a prescription to sleep through Jesse's snoring. Though Adam could prescribe sleeping aids to his patients and his partner, he couldn't

endorse them for his own use. He refused to use ear plugs or cover his head with a pillow. The compromise had been the television. It stayed on through the night, dulling Jesse's snoring and lifting Adam out of unconsciousness to assemble words and sounds into strange facts and news reports: wrinkle-free creams without Botox, tensions rising in the Middle East, a hurricane headed for south Florida, exercise equipment designed to reduce cellulite.

In the bathroom he washed his face again, brushed his teeth, and sat on the toilet. The painkiller had dulled his headache enough to read a magazine Jesse had left on the hamper. On the cover was the promise of details on Julia's pregnancy, Liza's cry for help, and Tom's deep, dark secret. Jesse adored this sort of celebrity trash; he could lose consciousness of his whereabouts in the grocery store or pharmacy simply by reading the latest article about Barbra's cancer scare or Pamela's plastic surgery mishaps. Adam flipped through the pages. At the back of the magazine was a short quiz, "Who's Your Celebrity Boyfriend?" with questions like "Do you prefer Brad Pitt's T-shirt and jeans look or Richard Gere's black tie elegance?" and "Would you prefer to be swept off your feet by Indiana Jones or Rhett Butler?" Jesse had inked in answers with a red felt tip pen, but Adam couldn't figure out the calculation of the scores, only that Jesse's final choice was George Clooney.

George Clooney, Adam thought. *I could be happy with him too. Mucho happier.*

Adam changed out of his crumpled work clothes and into sweats and sneakers. At the foot of the bed he stretched his arms and legs, listening to Jesse shake and snore. They had fought over the window treatments, the placement of the bed, the linen pattern, and size of the pillows. Adam had wanted to hang from the ceiling a carved wooden airplane with a red-and-blue-painted wingspan and tail that he had bought at an estate auction. Jesse brought in a Feng Shui expert who said it gave off too much negative energy. "You're projecting your own negativity," Adam argued. "I can't sleep with something flying over my head that I am certain is going to crash into the wall," Jesse answered. "Why don't you just hang a photograph of the Hindenburg?"

Taurus against Taurus. They were both right. Both stubborn. Both highly opinionated and trying to be the Alpha Male and not ready to be rushed into anything. In Adam's view, no positive energy had ever flowed in or out or around this room or house. Without Jesse, he would have blended sleek contemporary furniture with weathered sculptures and paintings. Frank Lloyd Wright and Grandma Moses. Now, it was too rustic and oriental for his taste, Paul Bunyan meets Nancy Kwan. Jesse often told Adam that without him, Adam's life would be boring and unmanageable. *No painted pink orchids on the sheets*, Adam thought. *No evenings watching Audrey Hepburn movies. No meals with casseroles or marinated meat.* "You would self-destruct without me," Jesse taunted him. "Your life would be chaos. You wouldn't have any clean underwear to wear. Not a scrap of toilet paper in the house."

Hardly, Adam thought and went downstairs. In the kitchen he checked his messages at work. Dr. Kestenbaum updating him on the status of a patient. Thea leaving changes in appointments. Thea leaving reminders. The night nurse telling him the doctor on call had changed a patient's dosage. Nothing about his car. Adam found the yellow pages directory in a drawer and located a rental car agency in Hellertown, seven miles away. He phoned and arranged to pick up a car later that morning. It would be an easy route. He could jog there in less than an hour.

Before he left the house, Adam wrote a note on the back of an envelope. "Jesse, Will be back soon. XXXOOO, Adam."

At the end of the driveway he stretched some more. The chill in the air thinned the skin at his nostrils. The headache was gone and his sense of smell was so sharp he could detect the scent of the nearby creek and the moss on the stones and the decomposing mulch of the ditch. October was one of his favorite months—the leaves coloring, the fields harvested, houses decorated with pumpkins and scarecrows, a trail of fireplace smoke lingering in the air. He had stopped jogging outdoors years ago when Jesse wanted to bike together. On Saturdays and Sundays they used to plan out their routes from the house—ride down to River Road, have lunch in Riegelsville, shop in Frenchtown, walk the bikes across the bridge

and then bike up the hills and back to the house. Then one year winter arrived too early and they never started up again in the spring. It was always too cold or too late to set out or there were too many errands to run or they had too little desire to do something together.

The downward slope of the first hill was easy, though Adam slowed and softened the impact of his feet against his knees. He waived to Phil Hankinson, his neighbor, as he jogged past the house and his startled collies began barking. Adam wanted to buy Hankinson's unused field that was adjacent to his own property, but they could never settle on an acceptable figure. His neighbor hated that Adam and Jesse had enlarged the cottage, added a pond, sculptured fountains, and a redwood gazebo to the property, and kept the barn lit up at night as if it were Versailles. Adam hated that Hankinson had made threats to sell his land to a developer, turning the plot and Adam's bucolic view from his dining room window into a cul-de-sac of expensive homes. Jesse had suggested that they retaliate by throwing more parties and neglecting to send over invitations, instituting a good neighbor policy of "Ignore and Annoy."

Adam settled into a comfortable pace when the valley leveled out, keeping to the shoulder of the road since there wasn't a sidewalk. The older homes, like his own, were set close to the road, but the newer ones, the mini-mansions designed and constructed overnight, sat nude and forlorn in the middle of what once was a corn field or a forest, waiting to be dressed with hedges and apple trees and flower beds. Adam had neglected to bring a water bottle with him, but his wallet was tucked in the pocket of his sweatpants. He would stop at a gas station if he felt he was dehydrated or hungry.

As his pace evened, he thought about Shane. And Jesse. Nothing was stopping him from making an investment in Shane. Maybe flaunting his interest in a younger man might make Jesse easier to live with. *Hardly*, he laughed at his own misguided imagination. He'd once described life with Jesse to a colleague at work as an endless three-legged race, a forever marathon of sprinting too fast

in the direction of the finish line but never quite being able to run in that direction because the person you were strapped to thought you could get there faster by taking a short cut in the opposite direction. Still, there was some kind of teamwork necessary to get *anywhere*. Or a bitter competition to remain connected and standing in place. Adam supposed it could be love, in its strange and absurd dysfunctional way. A display of emotions just to breathe and belong with each other.

This is what endorphins do to you, he thought. *They make you crazy. You think nothing is as it really was or should be. No, nothing at all.*

* * *

The ringing phone woke Jesse. He lifted his ear from the pillow and waited for it to stop. He wanted Adam to answer it or the caller to leave a message. The clock on the nightstand read a few minutes after nine. He heard the tires of a car drive over the gravel driveway. He lifted his head up, caught the scent of coffee, and looked through the bedroom window. He didn't recognize the car—a gray hatchback. A young bald guy approached the house. A flash of irritation fully wakened him. *Why had Adam invited someone over this early?* He heard the doorbell ring and waited for Adam to answer it.

There was nothing but emptiness. No sound of footsteps or creaking floorboards or the thump of the front door being pulled open. Jesse rolled out of bed. His back was stiff. His feet were swollen and tender. He took the steps downstairs slowly. His eyes were itchy, as if there was too much pollen or mold in the air. His mind was cloudy. He tried to think through a list of what he needed to do for the anniversary party for Matt and Peter tonight. *Get the cake. Buy wine. Groceries. Flowers—something for the table.*

When Jesse reached the door, the bald guy was heading back toward the car. He turned at the sound of the front door opening and said to Jesse, "I was looking for the doc."

"Not sure where he is."

"He left this at the gym," the bald guy said.

He lifted up a briefcase. The young man wore khaki cargo pants and an olive green T-shirt, as if he had come directly from boot camp.

Jesse got a quick glimpse of the flesh of a flat stomach as the guy held the briefcase out from his chest like a dumbbell. "Not surprised," Jesse said.

"They cut off the lock. I thought the Doc might feel safer with it here."

Jesse patted down his hair as the bald guy approached the door. This was the trainer that Adam had bragged about. Cute. Young. Buff. Body to desire. Tight skin stretched over plump muscles. No wonder Adam went AWOL from the hospital yesterday. "Not sure if he's here," Jesse said in a lower voice than usual, trying to sound more masculine. "Come on in."

"I've got a delivery for him, too," the guy added. "Case of champagne."

"Champagne?"

The guy stretched out the briefcase toward Jesse. Jesse took it and placed it inside the door.

"Okay to bring it in?"

"Sure."

Jesse left the door open and went into the kitchen. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass door of the microwave, frowned and patted down his hair again. He saw the Adam's note on the counter and the coffee pot half full. "Want some coffee?" he yelled to the guy at the door.

"No thanks," the guy answered and tentatively entered the kitchen. He set the case of champagne on the kitchen counter. Jesse detected the guy's uncertainty and found it endearing. He used a knife to open the case and lifted out a bottle of champagne to examine. He took out another bottle and placed them both on a shelf in the refrigerator. He asked the young man, "Want a bagel? Or juice?"

He didn't hear the answer. The phone rang and Jesse reached to answer it. It was Melissa, his sister. "Didn't you get my message to call me?"

"Not yet."

"It's Dad. He's in the hospital."

His composure left him. He heard his voice turn shrill and high-pitched. "What? *What happened?*"

Jesse listened to his sister explain that she, her mother, and his father had gone out for dinner the evening before. His father had ordered fish which he had complained of tasting too salty. On the way out of the restaurant he became dizzy and had chest pains. They drove him to the emergency room. The doctors had ruled out a heart attack but were keeping his father in the hospital for observations. His blood pressure was now too low.

Jesse was full of a thousand questions. "Why didn't you call me last night?" he asked his stepsister.

"I did. There was no answer. I didn't want to leave a hysterical message."

"Why didn't you try Adam? Or the cellphones?"

"Stop trying to blame me. I was there all night."

"Where was Carole?"

"She was with him. I *told* you that."

"Can you pick me up? I don't have a car."

"It's too far. Where's Adam?"

"Out. I don't know. If I knew where he was, I wouldn't ask you to pick me up." His annoyance flared. He slapped his hand against the kitchen counter, making the spoon that had been sitting there jump and rattle. He disliked asking for help. He disliked it even more to beg. And beg his sister. *Step*sister. "I'll figure something out," he yelled into the phone. "I'll call my car service."

Jesse wrote the room number of the hospital on the corner of the envelope beside Adam's message and hung up. He had completely forgotten about the young man standing in the shadows of the kitchen. He dialed Adam's cellphone. It rang and went directly into voicemail. "Adam, my dad's in the hospital and I need you to get to me there A-S-A-P. Where are you? Call me right away. I'm at the house."

"I can give you a lift," the young man said.

"You?" Jesse asked. He was startled that the young man was still in the house.

"If you need a ride."

"I'm sure it's out of your way. New Jersey. Let me see if I hear back from Adam."

There was an awkward moment when the young man should have excused himself and left. Instead, he persisted. "I owe the doc. He did me a favor."

"A favor? *Adam did you a favor?*"

"Yes, sir. He did."

"Don't call me sir. It makes me feel old.

"Okay…"

"Adam might not see this as a favor for him."

"He might," the young man said.

Jesse gave the young man a serious look. His eyes were milky green, just as Clay's had been. "Sean, isn't it?"

"Shane."

"Shane," he echoed. Jesse stretched out his hand to shake the young man's. "This isn't paying back Adam a favor. Adam will just tell me that I was taking advantage of you. Or him. He always twists things around to suit his purpose. I'll pay you for your help."

The young man pushed his neck back, about to protest, but Jesse cut him off. "You take cash?"

Shane's eyes widened. Those beautiful green eyes grew larger and more interested.

"Of course you do," Jesse said. "And I'll pay for the gas."

* * *

Jesse and Adam were a month away from celebrating twenty-five years together, a fact neither wanted to admit or ignore. Adam thought that within this box of time there were surprises of happiness and pride, from the efforts Jesse made to upgrade their vacation hotel reservations to his arranging parties celebrating their promotions, birthdays, and anniversaries. Jesse felt that his life with Adam had gathered its own density, in the same way that aging had thickened his waist; there were thin times and fat times, good luck and bad, a recipe of misunderstandings and overlooked calories.

They did not subtract the three months they broke up from the sum of their relationship. It happened after their sixth month of dating, shortly before Memorial Day. Adam had asked Jesse for a commitment, or at least an explanation of what they were to each other and where they were headed in their relationship. Jesse was not ready to commit; he was looking forward to a summer share in the Hamptons with six other single gay men. Adam was not included in these plans. But Jesse found himself unhappy at the summer house, at odds with his other housemates over the use of the television, the divided expense of groceries, and their success rate for tricks and his own lack thereof, and, the truth of the matter was, he missed Adam, particularly after Clay had told him that Adam was already dating another guy. Jesse was seized with a case of wanting what he could not have. Adam was invited out for the final weekend of the summer, a weekend Jesse's housemates failed to show up for because of the forecast of bad weather. Adam had enjoyed that first taste of living together, that "What would you like to do today, darling," sort of sunshine that arrives on rainy holidays. Jesse had assumed that Adam would always crave him in the way they had spent together in the upstairs bedroom, fondling and stroking each other for hours during a thunderstorm. He had looked directly into Adam's eyes that day, matched his breathing with Adam's breath by breath. He believed this sort of happiness could go on forever and ever.

"I can help out more," Jesse said to Adam on their train ride back to Manhattan.

"What do you mean?"

"If we lived together. I could pay the rent, help out with the expenses until you get a residency."

Adam suggested they work out a plan. He wanted to be responsible for his own bills. "Where do you want to be in five years?" he asked Jesse.

"Five years younger," Jesse answered.

"No, *realistically*."

"Realistically, the age I am now. The way I feel now."

They did not forget their seventh year, a year of challenges and

changes for both. It began with a fight in November, the night of their anniversary. Adam wanted to spend New Year's Eve together in London, but Jesse didn't want to leave town with Clay being ill. Adam felt a break was psychologically important. "He's lost too much weight," Jesse protested.

"Clay doesn't want you babying him."

"How do you know?"

"He's my friend, too."

"We can't walk away from him. He means too much to me. He's family. *Our* family."

"We're not walking away. We're taking a break. You need a break and I need a break."

"That's your solution?"

"It's not a solution," Adam said. "It's a *break*. A *temporary* break."

In the end, they did not leave town, but took Clay to see the Broadway musical *Phantom of the Opera*, an event that required a wheelchair and limo for the evening. Clay lost, in something like this order, his love for Mexican food, twenty-eight pounds, his hair, his ability to walk, and his wit.

Clay died in March, Jesse's grandmother died in April, and their pet cocker spaniel passed away in June, three gunshots Jesse felt right in the heart. He took his depression out on Adam, or so Adam believed, overlooking Adam's own grief and sense of loss. In May, one of Adam's patients, a fifteen-year-old boy who had been abused when he was younger, committed suicide. It was a blow to Adam's self-esteem and rising reputation as an adolescent psychiatrist. His hair went white almost overnight, a physiological curiosity Jesse failed to overlook, taunting Adam with nicknames like Gramps or Old Man or Big Daddy. They ended the year with short trips out of town, first to the Hamptons, to try and rekindle what they thought was lost, but where, instead, they seized on the idea of owning a weekend home together.

But not without fighting about it first.

Jesse wanted to be in East Hampton; Adam preferred Sag Harbor. Both agreed that the commute was horrible and the traffic

unbearable. Adam suggested some place with more solitude, perhaps the Catskills or Poconos or Berkshires. The compromise was Bucks County, another surprise for Adam and an evolving menu for Jesse.

Their thirteenth year involved more change. Adam accepted a staff position with a Lehigh Valley hospital. Jesse quit his job as a travel planner to oversee the renovations of the stone cottage on the new farm they had purchased near Easton. Adam thought that the property was a good investment. Jesse thought the renovations were exhausting. Adam was not there to oversee the daily digging and sawing and hammering and plastering. Problem upon problem—rain delaying the foundation, windows installed upside down, electrical outlets that failed to work.

Their fifteenth anniversary was celebrated in Hawaii. Their seventeenth anniversary they took a cruise to Alaska. Their nineteenth anniversary was one they both would like to forget. It began when Adam gave Jesse a painting. "It's yours," Adam said. It was a rural scene of a house on the slope of a mountain, similar to the one they owned together and were living in. Adam had spent a lot of money to acquire it from a dealer.

"What do you mean?" Jesse asked.

"All yours. A good investment. It will grow in time."

"These are all mine, too," Jesse answered, waving his hand around the paintings and antiques Adam had assembled and collected over the last nineteen years, one of which, an expensive painted wooden parrot Adam had spotted in a catalog and that Jesse had just given to Adam.

Adam went pale. "No. They're mine."

"*Ours*."

"These are all in *my name*. This one is in *yours*."

"If you think this house—this *home*—is divided into your possessions and mine, you had better try to call your lawyer faster than I will."

Their twentieth anniversary was celebrated three months late, when all the wills and bank accounts and insurance statements showed joint possession of their real estate and possessions, and they set out on a trip to Asia.

Jesse always acknowledged that he enjoyed their friends' comparison of them to George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or to Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas in *War of the Roses*. He thought it gave them a bit of a celebrity cachet when otherwise there would be no other way to define them except as "difficult "or "combative."

"I'd love to smash a few things around the house," Jesse might say at a dinner party if he was on his second glass of wine and in a bad mood. Adam was more defensive of their reputation as a couple and his own involvement. "Jesse loves to act out our dramas in front of an audience," he might add. "Making our shortcomings into the sort of melodramas that would never win him an Oscar."

* * *

After upgrading the rental car, Adam stopped at the dry cleaners and picked up his laundry: five dress shirts, two pairs of slacks, a jacket, and three ties. All this fighting over clothes. Dirty laundry. Territory. Possessions. Favors.

On the drive back to the house, he decided he would cook brunch as a surprise for Jesse. He would make Jesse a nice meal. That would make amends. Smooth things over. Adam would feed Jesse and then wash the dishes. He hadn't done that in years, about the time Jesse started complaining that he was doing everything and Adam shut down on giving him any affection.

At the supermarket, Adam stopped his cart in the dairy aisle and checked the time on his cellphone. He could call Jesse and ask what to buy—but it was too early and it would tip his hand, let Jesse know about his plan to do something nice for him. And if he called it would only open itself to an argument—Jesse saying that Adam should *know* what to buy, after all, hadn't he been stomaching everything Jesse had dished out for the last twenty-four years?

A fight raged in his mind. Adam pressed all his weight against the handle of the cart, gripping it as if he were about to twist and strangle something living. Adam knew he was defeated before he could even put a can of peas in the cart. If he bought the wrong

brand—the wrong item—Jesse was sure to complain. After twenty-four years Jesse had become a man of intense likes and dislikes. Food he adored. Food he stayed away from. Food he adored and stayed away from because he felt it had too many calories and was too much of a temptation, but which he bought and looked at and fretted over until he lost his will power and thawed it out or tore open the box and devoured it as "a tiny snack so I don't faint from hunger." *Well, it's an effort, at least*, Adam thought, putting a frozen quiche in the cart that he could simply heat and serve. *I can always point out that I made an effort. I can always use it to win the next argument.*

Underappreciated, he called his trainer Donnie on his cellphone. Adam would invite Donnie and his family to come over for an impromptu brunch. That could make Jesse crazy. Let's see if all those antidepressants Adam prescribed for Jesse worked. A house full of screaming children and a childish self-absorbed bodybuilder and his jealous pregnant girlfriend while Jesse was getting ready for a dinner party—yes, that *would* make Jesse crazy. *Crazier.*

"Jesus, man, I'm sorry about yesterday," Donnie said when he answered Adam's call. "My wife got sick and I thought it was time."

"You didn't show up?"

"No, man, didn't they tell you? I left you a message."

"Nope, no message."

Adam told Donnie the gym was trying to change the outside trainer policy, but it should be straightened out in a day or so, once Adam spoke to the owner. As a last resort, Adam was prepared to pay an outside fee for Donnie to use the gym. It was the least he could do.

"I know it's last minute," Adam said. "But I thought I'd make brunch. You want to bring Sherry and the kids over? I'm at the store now."

"Hold on," Donnie said. "Let me check with the big cheese."

Adam heard Donnie talking with Sherry. There were some muted words and Donnie was back on the line. Sherry agreed. Donnie told Adam they could be at his house close to noon, then rattled off some

things Adam could buy—for Donnie and for the kids, but mostly for Donnie—fresh fruit, vitamin supplements and additives for a protein shake he wanted before working out that afternoon.

Adam was pleased with the plan. He had a purpose. Something to do for the morning. Someone to do something for other than Jesse. He called the gym and asked for Shane. Maybe he would invite Shane and Paul over too. Make it a party. Announce their big business plans. That would certainly make Jesse ballistic.

"Day off," Debbie said, when Adam asked to speak to Shane.

"Can you give me his number?"

There was an awkward silence and Adam heard Debbie fumbling with her computer keyboard.

"No can do, Dr. O'Donnell. Against policy. You know how it is."

Adam hung up the phone without saying good-bye. Anger and disbelief washed over him again. Maybe he would buy the gym and put it out of business. Torch the building and collect the insurance and find a way to blame it all on Jesse. He filled up the shopping cart with the items Donnie had suggested. At the check-out register he threw in a scandal magazine for Jesse. "I got this just for you, honey," he would say to his insignificant other. "Don't ever say I don't think about you."

* * *

Less than a mile from the house, Shane said to Jesse, "I've got to make one quick stop. Drop off a laptop to this dude in Hellertown."

Shane took one of his hands off the steering wheel and waved it at a box in the back of the car. The car had a beaten-down look. Plastic cup lids were on the floor by Jesse's feet; in the back beside the box was a towel, a T-shirt, and a pair of socks, crumpled together into a mound as if it had been used as a pillow. Jesse didn't want to object to the detour; it would start them off on an uneasy trip. Instead of putting his hand back on the steering wheel, Shane stretched it out across the back of the seat, his fingers landing not far from Jesse's neck.

Jesse smiled. This kid was smart. Smooth. Cool. He knew exactly how to treat an aging gay man worried about his appearance. Jesse held an image of being out on an errand with his younger boyfriend. He flipped open the cover of his cellphone to check the time, and said, "That should be fine," something he would never have said if the young man had been Adam. Self-involved Adam doing something only self-involved Adam wanted to do.

"I can get you a better deal on a phone," Shane said. "Something with a sharp camera. Two megapixel, four digital zoom."

"And take pictures of what?" Jesse laughed. "Myself? I don't think so. Who would I send them to?"

"Send them to the doc."

"Are you kidding?"

"Then what about a BlackBerry?" Shane asked. "Those things are addictive. *CrackBerry*. Ever used one?"

"I've got plenty of addictions," Jesse answered. "No need to add another one."

"Bet I could find you a cool GPS so you know where you are. Where you're going."

"Where I'm going? Can it tell my fortune, too?"

"Hey, wouldn't that be something? Bet you could find your horoscope on it. What are you, Aquarius?"

"Aquarius?" Jesse laughed. "Not even."

"Thought you might be one of those air signs."

"A light weight?" Jesse answered. "No chance. *Taurus*."

"The bull," Shane said. "Better watch out!"

"And you?"

"Me? Sagittarius. I've got the traveling itch. Will too, someday."

"Let me know when," Jesse said. "Maybe I can get you a deal on something."

"For real? Maybe we can work out some trades."

Shane parked in front of a row house, jumped out of the car, leaned in and lifted out the box, and said to Jesse, "Be right back in no time."

Shane took the steps to the front door two at a time and rapped his knuckles on the front door of the house. Jesse had never found

a bald scalp attractive on a man—it reminded him too much of his grandfather's freckled scalp—a rather disgustful sight—but there was something unmistakably sexy to Shane's look. A scruffy, overweight guy in pajama-like sweats answered the door and led Shane inside. Jesse imagined Shane in front of a bathroom mirror, shirtless, lathering up his skull up with shaving cream, carefully running a razor across the top of his skull. Of course Jesse was part of the picture, in the next room, waiting patiently on the bed, brand new digital camera in hand ready to snap some sexy photos of the two of them together.

By the time Shane returned to the car, Jesse was in love. Swept off his feet. Harboring another silly infatuation with a guy he wanted to know more about.

"Dude's gonna be real happy with that," Shane said to Jesse when he was back inside the car, his arm again thrown across the back of the seat as he backed the car out of the parking space. "Got him a great deal on a Wi-Fi set up, too. He hates being tethered to one spot. Now he can go all around the house. You need one like that, let me know."

"Will do," Jesse answered, sounding amused and girlish.

They drove through a series of streets to reach the highway, passing the bus stop where Jesse had been the day before. From the road he could see passengers boarding a bus. He had a left-out, covetous feeling, as if they were all headed toward Manhattan and were leaving him behind. But he rebounded: *Look at me, everyone, here I am with a brand new beau. Don't we look fabulous together?*

When they reached the ramp to the highway Jesse dialed his younger brother in Florida. "Dad's in the hospital," he said when Ben answered.

"I spoke to his doctor this morning," Ben said. "It's not so serious. They need to make sure his blood pressure remains stable."

"I'm on my way there now."

"Don't get yourself all worked up over this."

"Me? This isn't about me. It's about Dad."

"Then don't start beating up on Carole or Melissa."

"When did you start becoming their ally?"

"You know what I mean. Don't walk in there and get everyone upset because they're not doing what you want them to do."

"I'm not getting good reception. I have to go."

Jesse hung up on his brother. Why had he thought that he could find some kind of alliance from Ben? They had never seen eye to eye on anything, particularly when it came to their dad and his health. Ben felt Carole should be involved in their father's healthcare arrangements and decisions because legally she was still his wife. Jesse thought his dad should divorce Carole, liquidate their joint business holdings, and move into an assisted-care facility, where he could get round-the-clock care. If Ben was in despair, Jesse would jump on the next plane to console him, ready to administer pep talks or interventions or distractions. But what would Ben do if it were Jesse who was in trouble? Stay put, using his wife and two kids and chiropractic office as an excuse to remain detached. "It's not like you're jumping on a plane and flying up here to help out," Jesse yelled at Ben a few weeks ago when their father had turned up lost at a mall and had walked into the security office for help. Jesse had made the drive from Pennsylvania to New Jersey to pick up their Dad and bring him back to his house. "You're comfortable being far away and *uninvolved*."

In the car, Jesse gave Shane a weak smile and said, "Family. They really know how to make you feel like shit."

Shane gave him a sympathetic nod. Ahead, lines stretched down the highway and a flock of geese bisected the sky.

"You have any siblings?

"Only child," Shane answered.

"You're lucky."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Your parents still together?"

"Divorced a few years ago. Mom lives in Scranton. My dad died last year."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. He was an asshole."

The comment made Jesse feel small and insignificant. On the scale of things Jesse knew he had a better life than most. Money

in the bank. Health. A companion he could bitch about. He knew he often pitched things into a higher drama. He knew he was self-centered and self-absorbed. Adam often goaded him that all his need to be the center of the known world was nothing more than a desperate cry for attention.

"My mom was a disappointment," Jesse said, thrown back into a memory of his mother guarding the kitchen cabinets. "She was very strict with me."

He was interrupted by a short ring of his cellphone. He lifted it out of his pocket and said hello, but the reception in the car was bad and the call disconnected. Outside, the traffic was mostly trucks, the sky gray with clouds that looked like they would burst open any minute with rain. He flipped the phone closed and said, "I was overweight as a kid. Hard to believe, huh? I had an obsession with food. My brother was so skinny you could almost see through him. My mom would hide food from me to give to my brother when I wasn't around, trying to fatten him up. I suppose it sounds like she was doing me a favor, but it did just the opposite. It made me feel like she was playing favorites. Like I was unloved or something."

He laughed and tried to turn it into a lighter story. "She used to hide cookies in her bedroom closet in a hat box. Delicious homemade ones she would bake while my brother and I were at school. I could smell them out. She hated that I could outsmart her—figure out where she had stashed the goods."

The story finished with a thud. Shane was silent, looking out at the highway as he drove, both hands clutched to the wheel now, and trying to change lanes. Jesse felt a small loss of control. Had he been alone, he would have turned on the radio or put on one of his favorite CDs and sung show tunes at the top of his lungs to calm his nerves. Now, at the mercy of another driver, he felt compelled to turn on his charm—or at least relocate it.

"So Adam decided to buy the gym?" Jesse said in a gossipy tone.

"What do you mean?" Shane answered. There was a nervous suspicion in his voice.

"He said something about the two of you going into business," Jesse added. "I thought you worked at his gym."

"I do," Shane said. "But he doesn't want to buy the gym, does he?"

"I think he wants to *change* the gym."

Shane did not answer. Jesse detected a thought playing across the young man's forehead, as if he were determining the most appropriate next response. Jesse wished there were some kind of topic he could easily plug into the conversation to make the young man adore him more—something about cellphones or laptops or traveling, maybe his opinion of the best beach in Hawaii or what he thought was the best chat room or why he felt Sondheim was overrated—but his mind went blank and he felt, well, like an old man, like a father trying to communicate with his son, as if each were suspiciously judging the words of the other. Adam at least had the gym in common with the boy—they could talk about deltoids and abs and stretching and supplements. Jesse thought about his own athletic history—he'd been a disappointment in Little League baseball, quickly relegated to the outfield where he watched fly balls magically land on the ground in front of his outstretched glove. He had liked playing basketball, but it was something he did with Ben in the driveway until his brother grew taller and began to beat him playing 21. Jesse had abandoned that sport in a hysterical snit of being a poor loser. He'd been okay at camp athletics—canoeing, hiking, making lanyards—was making lanyards a sport or a craft? He'd gone to the camp to sing show tunes—musical comedy theater camp, against his mother's wishes but with his father's approval, a place where little boys and girls could learn to sing and dance and act for applause. His first summer he didn't get the role he wanted—Barnaby in the camp production of *Hello, Dolly!* Jesse had stormed out of the recreational center to his cabin and wept in his bunk until he was consoled by his favorite counselor, Daniel Milano, a teenager with dark wavy hair and the faint beginnings of stubble at his chin and upper lip. Daniel Milano was Jesse's first big crush. Jesse had wanted to impress him by getting a coveted role. Jesse had become better friends with Janna Greenberg, whom he could talk to *about* Daniel—what he said, how he had said it, how his eyebrows lifted or his mouth pouted, what he had been wearing, what he had smelled like when he was wearing it. Jesse had tried kissing Janna; it was an experiment

of imagining how Daniel would kiss and quite unsatisfying. Jesse had returned to camp the next summer hoping Daniel would be there and wanting to become closer friends. Instead, he met Geoff Widmark, a camper with double-jointed fingers and crooked teeth, but with a bit more worldly experience. Geoff mocked Daniel and his wavy hair and pouty lips, called him a faggot, and asked Jesse if he had ever seen a girl's tits. Geoff Widmark showed Jesse his first adult magazine, filled with pages of photographs of naked women with big breasts and wide-spread legs. When Jesse told Daniel about the humiliating experience, in a somewhat nervous and frightened voice he had rehearsed and rehearsed, Geoff was history, shipped back to his hometown to taunt other boys.

"Big Donnie really pushes the doc," Shane said. "Doc's got a lot of lower body strength. I keep telling him I can get him some stuff to help bulk up on top if he wants. Get some really big guns. I can get all sorts of stuff, too, you know. Diet powders. Weight reduction tabs. Just tell me what you need, what you want, I can usually get it for you and with a good deal. Don't even take a markup for myself. Steep discount. I don't take a profit on any of this."

"Trust me," Jesse said. "You should charge the doc a markup. He can afford it."

"I want to be honest. Not try to stiff someone. That's how you get a good customer. That's why my friend Paul and I are going to start our own business. The doc said he would help us out. That's how we'll make the big bucks. I've already got the customers. Plenty of loyal customers. We're just gonna do it the right way now."

Money, Jesse thought. *It was all about money.* It pleased him to imagine Adam becoming poorer because of a guy's youth and attractiveness, though it bothered him that Shane had brought up the subject of dieting. Before Jesse could ask Shane what sort of business he was planning to start, he was distracted by a strange whining noise of the car's engine.

"Next exit?" Shane asked, dismissing the noise and any potential threat of a car problem.

* * *

"Jesse, sweetie, where are you?" Adam said when he reached Jesse's cellphone voicemail. "I went out to rent a car and now you're gone. Donnie and his family are coming over for brunch. I picked up all the food. Nothing for you to do except show up and be your usual unpleasant self. And I'll have it all cleaned up in time for the party tonight"

Adam was back at the house. He had decided not to invite Paul when he had been unable to get hold of Shane, worried that Jesse would create a scene in front of the young man—another one of his irrational, jealous rages.

He went upstairs to shave and shower. Standing in front of the mirror, he convinced himself he could live without Jesse. Sometimes, deep down inside, Adam blamed himself for Jesse's ill spells. He egged it on, knowing a specific comment or subject was sure to create a rise of annoyance or disbelief from Jesse. He could have been a better lover, or partner, or husband, but how interesting would that be? Really? At least fighting he and Jesse knew they were alive and living, wounded and winning the battle against boredom. If only they could find a way to be nice to each other *occasionally*.

Dressed and downstairs, he noticed the opened case of champagne and bottles cooling in the refrigerator. He heated up the quiche in the oven and sliced the bagels into halves. On his voicemail he heard Jesse's message about his father being taken to the hospital. Adam tried Jesse's cellphone but the call disconnected. "I'll call the hospital," Adam said, when he tried again and got Jesse's voicemail. In the phone directory, he located the number of the New Jersey hospital where Jesse's father had been taken. He called the main number, and was transferred to the nurse's station on the floor where Jesse's father was a patient. He asked the nurse on duty the status of Jesse's father, who the doctor on call was, and what tests were being scheduled. He thanked the nurse for the information and called Jesse's cellphone again.

"They'll probably keep him in the hospital till Tuesday," Adam said, when he was dumped into voicemail again. "They want to run some cardiology tests, just to make sure everything is okay."

Next he called Carole, Jesse's stepmother, on her cellphone. She was at the hospital, in Jesse's father's room. She told Adam that

her husband was napping. Adam asked her specific questions about Jesse's father responsiveness—could he lift his arms, fingers, make a fist, walk? Adam had never had the antagonistic relationship with Carole that Jesse had. He treated her exactly as a polite professional relative would be expected to treat an in-law—attentive and concerned. Carole shared Adam's love of antiques and art, though Adam never thought she had acquired any talent in selecting good investments, going instead for a flashy image or a celebrity favorite. He particularly hated the three-dimensional Jeff Koons print she used to decorate her dining room. At the end of their conversation, Carole said, "Adam, Adam, Adam, you're so nice to check in on us. You should think about relocating your practice to this hospital—there are some truly gorgeous interns here."

"I'm afraid I'm too much a creature of habit," Adam answered. "Rooted too deeply into place."

"Well, at least let me fix you up with the cycling trainer at my gym. Cute as a button. Ass for days."

Adam was surprised at Carole's dismissiveness of his relationship with Jesse—the reason, in fact, he had felt compelled to call her, *not because he was her friend*. Through the kitchen window he saw a car pull into the driveway. It was Donnie and his family. Adam wanted to pursue this conversation a little bit further, if only to taunt Jesse with it later, but he gracefully declined with, "You know I couldn't do that to Jesse."

"Or at least not so openly," she said before saying good-bye.

At the front door, Adam noticed the day had changed. The sky was darkened by rain clouds, a brisk wind rippled through the leaves, scattering many across the lawn. Adam realized his mistake of arranging a brunch without Jesse when Donnie and his family entered the house. Donnie tossed his bomber jacket onto the back of a chair. He wore a tight-fitting white T-shirt that made his muscles look huge. Adam was transfixed. Out of the gym Donnie seemed giant and cartoonish—a superhero in his kitchen. Adam was aware that he had lost his perspective and bearing, but could not alter or change anything about it. Donnie's middle daughter, three-year-old Kelly, was crying. She had not been allowed to bring her favorite doll to brunch.

"I told you to let her bring her Barbie," Sherry yelled at Donnie.

"I don't want her growing up with all these psychological crutches," Donnie yelled back at his girlfriend. "Right, Doc? She's gotta learn to stand up on her own."

"She's three, for Christ's sake," Sherry answered. "She doesn't understand. You don't expect a little girl of three to understand that?"

Adam deflected offering a diagnosis or taking sides by offering them drinks. At that moment he missed Jesse. Jesse would have made Adam more focused. He would have dropped to his knees and offered something special to the crying little girl to calm her down—a piece of candy or a cookie or a popsicle—things Jesse kept around the house when he needed a snack. But Adam could not find that level of generosity or compassion or tolerance. Away from the office and out of a professional environment, Adam was awkward around children. Around their parents he ignored their offspring, not wanting to indicate his dislike or deliver a wrong spot diagnosis, which he was often asked to provide. He had never been the type of man who wanted to raise kids, his own life was far too unmanageable, and then there was Jesse. Jesse was enough of a child not to want the real thing, and, the truth of the matter was, Adam knew his own behavior turned childish and infantile around Jesse. He and Jesse were barely able to manage the dog they had had for four years, Crazy, a hyperactive black-and-white cocker spaniel. Crazy had been a spontaneous purchase one afternoon when they were walking home from brunch, a blatant attempt to make themselves less reliant on sex and feel like a family, or, at least like two brothers sharing a dog. At first Crazy bonded with Jesse and Adam exactly as they had hoped, each concerned on the welfare of the other with overflowing affection for all. Then there were more arguments over who was walking her and taking her to the groomers. The arguments intensified into resentment when first, Adam had not been able to rearrange his caseload to make it to the house to walk and feed the dog, and then when Jesse had decided to take Crazy on a weekend trip to the Hamptons. At the beach, the

dog had become dehydrated from the heat and close to death.

Donnie took control of the kitchen, asking where the blender was, chopping up the fruit and pouring the milk. Adam was conscious of Donnie's every move, watching the way his biceps flexed, the tendons in his forearms tightened, the way the cotton fabric hugged his chest. Kelly settled down when Adam gave her a piece of a sticky cinnamon bun, but then the baby, Jennifer, clapped her hands and shrieked, interrupting the adult conversation. Adam was trying to get Donnie to tell him about a developer who was buying up nearby property and building new homes; Donnie, when he wasn't at the gym and working as a personal trainer, did construction work, mostly carpentry and framing, something he said he enjoyed. "Satisfaction," Donnie curtly explained to Adam. He was never a man of many words. "You know, building something." *Just like his body*, Adam thought.

Sherry made gibberish sounds to Jennifer and bounced the baby on her knee to make her giggle. It reminded Adam of the day at the gym when Donnie had given him a glance into his sex life with his girlfriend. Sherry was perky and blonde-haired, more chunky than slender; she had probably been a popular cheerleader in school and not the one voted Most Attractive or Best Looking. She had known Donnie since they were kids. Their families had gone to the Methodist church in Hellertown, but they did not date until Donnie broke up with Holly Sutton, the prettier cheerleader at their high school. Sherry got pregnant their senior year, but finished all of her graduation requirements before giving birth to their oldest daughter, Wendy.

"She breaks my balls," Donnie had said to Adam at the gym about Sherry. Donnie was spotting Adam on the bench press. When Adam finished his reps and sat up, Donnie whispered to him, as if they were boys trading dirty secrets in the football field behind the school. "One problem after the next she's got some kind of beef about. But she drives me crazy in the sack." Donnie explained how his girlfriend shuddered when she was beneath him, a technique of trembling her hips during intercourse. "I can't tell if she learned it or if it's real," he added. "But when she's does it, it's like…oh, man,

it's so the right thing, if you know what I mean."

Adam had thought about what it would be like beneath Donnie's weight as well. He decided the trembling was not an act. Adam would have felt the same way. In a way, Adam knew Jesse was right. Adam was having an affair with Donnie. A fantasy affair that he could revisit at any moment of his day. Or night. *Trembling, yes.* He often imagined himself doing the same thing.

Donnie fed the baby while Sherry helped with the older girls. *There's usually an imbalance in relationships*, Adam thought. *One partner's better looking, or has more money, or is smarter or has more common sense.* This imbalance was probably why Donnie stayed with Sherry, she trembled with him, looked up to him, changed the kids' diapers and cleaned the kitchen. This same sort of imbalance was probably why Adam stayed with Jesse, though it was more like a tug of war, some days he was winning, other days desperately losing. Equal *and* imbalanced.

Sherry was cleaning a spilled bowl of applesauce from the floor when the phone rang. Adam answered it upstairs, in the bedroom. It was Fran Mulroney, the weekend nursing supervisor at the hospital, calling to tell him that Mr. and Mrs. Russo were asking if he were available for an emergency session with their daughter Gina. Gina had been admitted to the Emergency Room the night before and was now under suicide watch. Dr. Kestenbaum, who was on call that weekend, had seen her and had her under observation.

"I thought Dr. Pynter was on the case."

"She is…was," Fran said. "But the parents are asking if you could see them today."

"Is Dr. Pynter all right with this?"

"Yes. She spoke with Dr. Kestenbaum."

Adam told the nurse that he would meet the Russos in an hour at his office. When he hung up, something crashed to the floor downstairs in the kitchen. It was a glass shattering. Adam hoped it was one of Jesse's cheap dishes and not one of the pricey Waterford glasses he was letting the girls use to find rainbows.

* * *

Once, Adam had fallen in love with a patient. It was the year Clay was sick, the year Jesse was trying to prove he was Clay's best friend, the year Adam felt left out. The boy, Zak, was fourteen, sexually abused, and had tested HIV-positive. He had been in and out of foster care since he was almost three years old, when two eye injuries caused blindness in his left eye. He was in his fourth foster home when he was brought to the hospital for threatening his foster father with a knife. Adam had first encountered Zak in the emergency room, where he was restrained by two workers for screaming.

It was a complicated doctor/patient relationship, and Adam moved through it slowly and ethically. Adam was fascinated by Zak's looks—the pale complexion and dark hair, the faint etchings of puberty sweeping across his face. The boy's personality calmed in Adam's presence. Adam was careful not to react to him sexually, imagined or otherwise. Zak's history of abuse included rape by an elder foster brother. Adam's gaydar, yes, gaydar—as odd and impractical as it sounds—told him that Zak was gay. And gay and bisexual male teenagers were high risks for suicide.

Zak had violent issues with "faggots" and "pansies" and "fudge-packers." His case history showed that the rape had also made him HIV-positive. Adam, hoping that his own homosexuality could be revealed as a different and better role model, failed to disclose his sexuality to his patient, even though he was out and open with the hospital staff.

At night Adam lay awake concocting dialogues in which Zak confessed he was in love with Adam. Adam refused the boy every time. But like anyone in love, awake and in his office, Adam found reasons to revisit Zak's file daily, looking for ways to help the young man.

Their sessions were thoughtful and restrained, however, except for those occasional outbursts, but Adam considered them demonstrations of anger and frustration and not potentially violent and harmful. Zak was well-read, bright, and articulate. His favorite novel was *Huckleberry Finn*, because he liked the friendship between Huck and Jim. Adam supplicated his parental instinct and sympathy around Zak. They discussed *Tom Sawyer* and Ray Bradbury—the

boy had also enjoyed *The Martian Chronicles*. Adam's treatment was successful, at least for the hours they were together. The boy was released, put back into the foster-care system, and was back in the hospital a month later with a broken arm.

At breakfast Zak got into an argument with another boy. He punched his broken hand in front of the other boy's face. When an orderly asked Zak to move to another table, Zak refused twice, and the worker brought him to the timeout room.

When Zak was told to remove his shoes, he kicked them off, nearly hitting the orderly. Zak refused to move from one end of the room to the other, and when the orderly tried to escort him to the corner, he went ballistic. Zak was restrained and sedated. Again, Adam saw Zak as a patient and tried to help him work through his fears and violent behavior. Again, Adam did not place his sexuality into the doctor/patient dynamic. The day Zak was released, two weeks later, and placed with another foster family, Zak hanged himself.

In the review of the case by the social agencies and the hospital, no fault was placed on Adam, no unethical behavior was noted, though Adam always held the private point of view that if he had told Zak that he was gay, he might have prevented the boy's suicide. Adam did not disclose any details of Zak's case history to Jesse except in the vaguest terms—"I have a violent patient." "I have a partially blind boy who loves to read." "My patient became violent again today." "My patient committed suicide." This left Adam bottled up and frustrated, unable to admit his responsibility. He vowed he would never keep his homosexuality a secret from his patients.

* * *

They were both on edge because they were closing in on fifty.

Adam had survived a premature birth, a broken arm at six, chicken pox at eleven, a hepatitis scare at eighteen, and a broken wrist at twenty-eight. He had avoided braces, never had a tooth capped, decided against a nose job, and had not contracted HIV.

Jesse had six fillings and two root canals, blaming it all on the

hidden sweets he enjoyed as a boy. He'd indulged in facials, eyebrow waxing, and contact lenses. He had never believed he was what the world would call a sexy man. Even in his younger and most alluring days he was not the kind of guy to pull off a spandex outfit at a disco or a sleeveless flannel shirt unbuttoned to his navel. In some respects, he believed this had saved his life, desire trapped beneath his fattened skin, a genetic mutation designed to survive the heartbreak of unrequited love.

Adam sprouted body hair at thirteen. It grew in quickly, almost overnight, suddenly a dark secret beneath his clothes. As a teenager he wore shoulder-length hair, which his father had hated. He'd sampled sideburns, mustaches, beards, and goatees before he settled on a preppy, clean-shaved look.

Jesse's hearing was stable but his cholesterol was too high for his physician's comfort. Because of his father, Jesse worried more about his memory. Why did he forget the words to songs he had sung for years or where he had put the car keys only hours before? He could now watch a movie which he had loved in his childhood and experience it like he was seeing it for the first time.

They had celebrated Jesse's thirtieth birthday at a restaurant in Beverly Hills. On Adam's thirty-fifth birthday they went hiking in Tuscany. Their fortieth birthdays were a dual celebration with their family and more than fifty friends. Their forty-fifth birthdays were trips to St. Barts (for Jesse) and Mexico City (for Adam). No plans had been made on how they would celebrate the Big Five-O.

Both knew how easy it was to fall in love in your thirties or forties. And how less likely it would be in your fifties. Particularly for a gay man. Neither wanted to end up on the beach in Venice with black streaks of mascara on their cheeks muttering "Where did I go wrong?"

When Adam's hair first went white, he tried to hide the fact by using a rinse, which Jesse told him looked "cheap and fake" and Adam knew his partner was right. When Jesse's weight began to rise more than it would fall on a diet, he created a new camouflage look with longer sweaters and T-shirts, which Adam told him made him look like he was in the last trimester of a pregnancy and Jesse knew

Adam was not lying. "We know it's not yours," Jesse defensively sneered at Adam. "And for once you're right about something," Adam answered.

If Jesse had his way, he would drape all the mirrors in the house with black sheets, in mourning for his lost youth. Adam, however, continued to stare at every reflection he caught of himself, wondering if he would look younger with darker hair.

* * *

By the time they had reached the highway exit Jesse had undressed Shane, had sex with him several times and in a variety of positions, and was comfortable enough to suggest that Shane should grow out his hair and get rid of the scruffy looking pirate beard—or at least Jesse imagined that all of this had transpired. Shane was talking about his addiction to videogames and why he refused to hook up a game console to his television set. "I'd be one stupid fool in no time," Shane said. "Brain dead and flabby."

Jesse, experiencing the sensation of new love, was full of memories. He wanted to point out to Shane the high school he had attended, the temple his family had gone to, the mall where he had his first job in the storeroom of a clothing store, the library where he had nagged the unhappy librarian for the latest issues of *Variety* and *Show Biz*. *Look honey,* he wanted to say, *that's where I first looked up the word "homosexual" in the dictionary!*

They drove past the street that led to the house where Jesse's family had lived before his parents divorced, where his bedroom had been covered with Disney characters. He'd started with the Mouseketeers, morphed into a Hayley Mills fan and learned all of her songs from *Summer Magic*. He'd perfected a British accent, just like hers, which had annoyed his mother but his father had found clever.

A few doors down was the house where his friend Emily lived, where she and Jesse would practice their dance steps in the basement in front of an old mirror that belonged to her grandmother. *Darling, we used to make up our own dialogue. This was long before VCRs,*

before you could rewind and rewind to get all the words right.

There were years and years of history in this small space of streets, which Jesse was able to forget when he was alone, driving from one spot to the next. But now, *now*, Jesse felt compelled to share with Shane all these physical artifacts that had been stapled together to create his life. But he couldn't—he just couldn't articulate any of it because he knew it would reveal his desire for the young man—*See, over there, there was my dermatologist's office, and the hotel where my brother's wedding reception was held, and the apartment complex where I went with Keith. Keith, yes, honey, Keith, let me tell you all about Keith.*

Keith was Jesse's coworker at the mall. He had invited Jesse over to his apartment on the pretext of giving Jesse some of his unwanted albums. It had really been an invitation for sex. Keith had been the first guy Jesse had kissed and fooled around with—Keith, who looked like a surfer clone of Jan-Michael Vincent—curly blond hair, dark tan, and wide sideburns, a small patch of dark hair at the center his chest. Jesse had been seventeen at the time, about to leave for Boston for college. Keith had taken an interest in Jesse's love of musical theater. Jesse had acted out the plot of *Camelot* and sung his favorite song from *Oliver!*—"Where is Love?"

"You like that stuff, huh?" Keith asked.

Keith's own preferences tended toward breezy pop and light vocals—Simon & Garfunkel and the Beach Boys. Jesse had tried to educate Keith on the importance of show-stoppers—soaring notes and complicated dance steps. Liza Minnelli and Barbra Streisand, with a little bit Bette Midler's pizzazz thrown in for special effect. Now, years later, Jesse recognized that Keith's interest in him had nothing to do with jazz steps or Jesse's choreography with props, but the fact that Jesse was young and slender and attractive. He was *desired*. He felt ridiculous now remembering teaching Keith Liza's choreography for "Ring Them Bells." A rising pressure lodged in his chest and he let out a sob, a guttural, "Oh no, no, no."

It surprised Shane. "What's wrong? Dude, you okay?"

Jesse let the tears run a few seconds. He wiped his eyes and said, "I forgot my antidepressants."

"Dude, I can get you some better stuff."

Honey, there's no need for that. I'm already married to a doctor. "I'll be okay," Jesse said, instead. "My dad's got me worried."

At the hospital, the car shuddered and sputtered to a stop, as if it were mimicking Jesse's short crying jag. Jesse pulled his pants away from the back of his legs where his nervous sweating had stuck them. "You don't need to stay," he said to Shane as they approached the entrance. "I can get a ride back."

"I can hang around for a bit. Maybe see if anyone needs one of those portable DVD players. You seen those? You can watch a movie right in your lap. Imagine if you had one of those in your hospital room."

"There's a cafeteria," Jesse said. "You don't have to be nice to my family. God knows, it's hard enough for me to do it."

Inside, Jesse's feet were heavy, like he was walking underwater. Ever since the wave of deaths of Clay and his other gay friends, Jesse had feared hospitals. Any hint that he wouldn't live forever—whenever he had to deal with life insurance or updating his will—made him resentful and depressed. Adam, on the other hand, worried that he would live forever, or worse, that they would both live forever together, destined to taunt and torture one another until the bitter end. Waiting for the elevator, Jesse considered how he should introduce Shane to Carole. A friend? One of Adam's trainers? *My new husband?* But the young man slowed as they approached Jesse's father's room, and Shane gestured to Jesse that he would wait in a reception area where there was a television.

In the room, Jesse's father was watching the same television program that had been on in the lobby—a golf tournament. Jesse suppressed the notion to roll his eyes in disbelief. Just as he had failed to rise up through any of the athletic ranks, so he had failed to watch and appreciate any sort of sports program on television. There seemed to be no drama to any of it, no zest or spice, no sense of irony. At best, he could sit through a tennis match, particularly if one of players competing were attractive, or the Olympics gymnastics meet, which he didn't considered sports at all but the next best thing to a porn video. *But golf? Why, why, why?* When

Jesse was sick with a cold or the flu, he only wanted to watch old movies—black-and-white screwball comedies or lush Technicolor MGM musicals. Maybe Shane had a good idea. Hospital rooms with portable DVD players. Candy-stripers arriving with a library cart of DVDs. *Portable happiness.*

"There must be something better on," Jesse said when he approached his father's bed. Carole was reading a magazine. She looked up when Jesse kissed his father's forehead. His father had not shaved, always a disconcerting sight for Jesse.

"It's from Scotland," Carole answered. "Very scenic." She turned her attention back to her magazine, briskly flipping the pages to call attention to herself and the fact that she was not interested in Jesse. Her lips formed a pout, or a look of disgust, Jesse thought, as if she had smelled the stink of her own righteousness.

"You should have called me last night," Jesse said to his stepmother in a tone that displayed his annoyance. "I was in the city. I could have gotten here quickly."

"What did the doctor say?" his father asked. His voice was hoarse and slow.

"I haven't seen him yet," Jesse answered. "Is he here today?"

"Not mine. *Yours.*"

His father's memory surprised Jesse. Jesse looked at his stepmother and saw that she had abandoned reading her magazine and was pretending to watch the television, interested in knowing why Jesse was seeing a doctor. *She'd love to have me out of the picture,* he thought. "It was a consultation," he told his father. "Purely cosmetic."

"What do you need to fix?" his father said. "There's nothing wrong with you."

Jesse detected the subtle arch of Carole's left eyebrow, as if she were suppressing a vicious remark. Carole was thin and tanned, her hair permed and straightened and bleached and dyed so often, she now wore hair extensions or a wig to hide its brittleness. Every inch of her was waxed and exfoliated and lotioned and perfumed. Her days were spent going to Pilates classes and manicure appointments. She thought of herself as a professional interior designer with an

acquired sense of taste. She'd been his father's receptionist when his Dad had started dating her. She had grown up in Staten Island before moving to New Jersey with a boyfriend who got her pregnant and abandoned her. Adam refused to let her help decorate their house when they moved and began renovations, telling Jesse he had to find a way to tell his stepmother "no" *politely*. Carole had asked Jesse to intercede on her behalf because she needed them as clients to land other commissions. "We want to do it our own way," Jesse had told her. "We want it to be about us. You understand, don't you? Adam's very protective of his space."

"What a beautiful ring," Jesse said to his stepmother. "Is that new? Dad, did you give her that?"

Lately, Jesse noticed that Carole had been investing in a number of expensive pieces of jewelry, items that Jesse believed she was determined to sweep into a handbag once she divorced his father or his father was dead.

"This?" she said, waving her fingers and fidgeting with a diamond ring surrounded by sapphires. "This was nothing. I saw it in a shop last week in Summit and thought it would look nice. It isn't at all what you think it is. I know how to bargain."

* * *

"Dr. Pynter updated me briefly on Gina," Adam said when he found Mrs. Russo waiting outside his office at the hospital. "She seems to be doing okay. Stable. But she's being watched. I'll stop by and see her when we finish our talk."

Mrs. Russo was a thin, nervous-looking woman in her mid-forties with small suspicious eyes, a pinched expression on her lips, and dark curly hair which she wore in natural ringlets etched with gray. She preferred a holistic approach to illness—herbs, exercises, organic foods. In their first appointment she had outlined that her mother and older sister had both been breast cancer victims and she might be too overprotective as a parent, monitoring Gina and her older sister Stacy too closely for signs of ill health. Stacy was a high school super girl, popular and an academic achiever. Gina had

become lost in her older sister's shadow.

"Dr. Pynter said that Gina did not respond well to Miss Rivera, the social worker," Adam said.

"She thought she was too judgmental."

"In what way?"

"She wouldn't look her in the eye."

"Self-injury makes many on the staff nervous, especially those who haven't dealt with prior cases or been through the appropriate training," Adam said. "Patients are rarely suicidal, and when they are, it's usually accidental. Like Gina, re-opening a wound that had not healed."

"We're just lost on what to do."

"You should find your own stress reducer," Adam said. "It's only going to complicate matters if you're stressed when you are around her. Do you meditate or do yoga?"

Mrs. Russo nodded. Adam deflected his attention to the notes in the file on the top of his desk. Every day at the office he was aware of the irony of his situation, asking others about their stress and anxiety and frustrations and anger and unable to manage his own. He remembered the days when he was in college and he would be filled with panic of not understanding a theory of economics or psychology and he would return to his dorm room and masturbate, images of men crowding out all other frustrations until they were forgotten. But with Jesse he needed other outlets: breathing exercises, power naps, listening to music, an extra trip to the gym and the steam room.

"But there are so many things to do." Mrs. Russo said. "It's the last thing I can get to, and I usually don't."

"As I mentioned before, earlier in the week, one of the things we need to address is the underlying cause of Gina's pain. Has she been abused? Or is it self-esteem? It's hard to know if she is suffering from depression or just experiencing the angst of being a teenager and finding her body changing and her hormones shifting. You should understand that Gina may never confide in you or your husband why she is cutting herself. Next we need to treat the addiction. Yes, it's an addiction. Cutting is not like piercing or tattooing, which

reflect an adolescent trendiness. It's an addiction. It's usually done in private. Cutting releases endorphins that make the body fight anxiety and depression. These endorphins make you feel better. The cutter achieves a trancelike state. The exchange for emotional pain is physical pain. I understand that Gina did not respond well to the medication Dr. Pynter prescribed."

Mrs. Russo shook her head "no," then said, "Is medication necessary?"

"We should determine if this behavior might be from some kind of chemical imbalance. Even if it is a chemical imbalance, we're still dealing with a complex mix of factors. Medication might help her get better, but getting better requires replacing her cutting with a trusting attachment to an understanding person, which is where I and the staff come in. We're talking about individual therapy, group therapy, and family therapy, and that includes your other daughter and your husband."

"He's disappointed that God is not solving the problem," Mrs. Russo said.

"God? That's an odd statement for a religious man to make."

"Well, not God. But faith. That our faith isn't strong enough to prevent this."

"Your husband is being naïve. He's using religion—or his faith—as an excuse to not become involved and avoid other issues. Faith doesn't prevent cutting or car accidents or breast cancer. God or Jesus or faith might provide you with the strength to get through this, but it will not prevent it or solve it. Though in this case, I believe Mr. Russo might be using his faith as an excuse to hide his own fear."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean his reluctance to have me involved with Gina after our first meeting."

"I'm sorry about that. He doesn't approve of…*it*. It makes him uncomfortable."

"Few things frighten parents more than the thought that their children will be stolen away from them, sucked into some kind of vortex of evil and transformed into an unthinking zombie." Adam said, trying to maintain a balance between being humorous and

serious. "I'm not the leader of some cult out to swipe your daughter from you. But your husband has interjected his uneasiness with my being homosexual into this mix. Like I said, the factors are complex, as will be the results. I understand that he mentioned this to Gina, as well."

Mrs. Russo nodded. She folded her hands together in her lap, her fingers twisted together.

"Now that it's out there and part of the mix, it shouldn't be a problem anymore. It's a fact that is not going to change. Are you comfortable with that?"

Her eyes welled up with tears and she shook her head, holding back a sob. "We had no clue any of this would happen," she said. "We want to do what is best for Gina."

* * *

Jesse went into the hall to take the call on his cellphone. He thought it was Adam, following up on Jesse's visit with his dad. Instead, it was Jesse's mother.

"Please give your father my regards," she said.

"I'm not sure he wants to hear from you," Jesse replied. He walked down the corridor toward a small waiting area.

"That's not a very polite way to greet your mother."

It was hurtful to admit, but Jesse was not a gay man who adored his mother. Everything about his childhood was restricted and monitored—clothes, food, movies, television. His mother didn't like the way he sang and danced around the house, told him he was acting like a sissy and giving her a headache. He longed for another family—the Cleavers, the Nelsons, the Robinsons, the Clampetts—or at least for another mother, someone who would bend over and show him some concern and love. Jesse's mother was his Dad's second wife. Sometimes, in a fit of boyish hysterics, Jesse believed that she had never been his true mother—his true mother was Gloria Lulenski Berger—his dad's first wife, a busty platinum blonde with a sense of humor whose family had urged her to go to Hollywood and try her luck. (She had only gotten as far as

Harrisburg, married a second time, gotten a divorce two years later, and had moved to Atlantic City. His Dad had married Gloria at sixteen, on the way out of high school and into the army; it seemed the right thing to do at the time, his Dad had once told him, but the wrong thing when time and distance made them a bit wiser. Jesse had visited Gloria several times as a teenager, at the casino restaurant where she worked as a barmaid, which Gloria joked was "one step up from MGM.")

In the early days of his parents' separation, when Jesse was twelve, his father phoned Jesse every day. Jesse pleaded to move in with his Dad. His mother had wanted to ship him off to military school. Make a man out of him. Toughen him up. She had already taken him for counseling and tests, trying to get him to quit acting so silly because he wanted to sing and dance. "You can't go through life acting like this," she told him. "No one is going to take you seriously."

He'd tried to make amends with her as an adult, for all those years of therapy and counseling and group sessions and confessions. The year he was twenty-two, just graduating college and moving to Manhattan, he flew down to Coconut Grove and met her for lunch at her favorite restaurant. It was only steps away from her apartment. No effort at all for her. He was ready to tell her he was gay.

"Like it's something I don't know?" she laughed. She had *laughed* at him. "You were such a little *faygelah*, Jesse."

It bothered him that she considered him stereotypical. His own flesh and blood. Not special or unique or adored. Like every other little boy who wants to grow up and go into show biz. Homosexual. A faggot. Silly, not serious. *Girly.* She had never given him an ounce of support, not even a "congratulations" after he had perfected a time step without losing his balance. His mother had equated his love of show tunes and movie musicals with being gay, without acknowledging the years of soul searching and terror and fear that it took Jesse to accept this fact about himself.

He'd hated sitting there in the restaurant thinking of her own faults, playing the game the same way as she did. Ben had always been

her favorite. His mother was vain and self-absorbed, brushing aside Jesse's desire to learn how to cook his own cupcakes as "too messy" and an interruption to her cigarette and the new issue of *Life*.

Nana had never pushed him out of the kitchen. In fact, his grandmother was always pulling him away from a book or the television. "Jesse, come help me make this *rugelah*." Or "*Tahtelah*, do you want to lick the batter spoon?" She would stop whatever she was baking to listen to him sing the theme song from *The Patty Duke Show* or *The Beverly Hillbillies*, clap her hands together and tell him how talented he was. He found in those small gestures from his grandmother the love that was missing from his mother.

"Be sure you get what you deserve," his mother told Jesse on the phone.

"What do you mean?"

"Your father made a lot more money after our divorce."

And she was greedy. She had resented that his father made his wealth after he left her. There was always a phone call to Jesse asking what his father had bought for the new house, or what did his new furniture look like, or what kind of car was "that woman he was married to now" driving. She resented that Jesse and Ben had come into their own small fortunes when Nana died—his paternal grandmother had banked away her money into trust funds for her two grandchildren. His mother felt she had not gotten what she deserved from the family. Jesse thought otherwise.

"You don't get it, do you, Mom? Dad's sick. This isn't about money."

"That woman will get all your father's money."

"It's not your concern anymore."

"I'm concerned about you."

"*Now?* Now you're concerned about me?"

"I don't like your tone. I'm still your mother."

There were days when the image of his mother rose up into the mirror as Jesse reached for a toothbrush or a razor. Her brown eyes. Her pinched nose. The curve of her lips. She could linger within him as he would move through his day, larger and more substantial than a simple genetic flicker. He found her unpleasantness in his

gestures, his voice, his inflection, the sudden complaint rising from his gut to his throat.

"And you're still trying to make me feel miserable," he answered. "I'm hanging up now."

"I don't know why you treat me this way."

"Try remembering how you treated me."

Finished, he saw that there were two voicemail messages waiting. One was from Rocco, asking if Jesse needed him to bring any last-minute thing for the party tonight. The other was from the Porsche dealer saying that Adam's car was ready to be picked up. A part had been found at a Connecticut dealer and it had been shipped down and replaced that morning. Jesse called the dealer and said that he would have the car picked up today. He speed-dialed Adam's number, then aborted the call, thinking he might just forget about it and make Adam miserable a little while longer.

Down the hall, he saw Shane talking with Melissa. Jesse had not known Melissa was still at the hospital. Melissa was flirting with Shane, leaning toward the young man with her shoulders pressed together, looking at something that was on the screen of Shane's cellphone. Jesse pulled a business card from his wallet and called the number of the tire dealer who had picked up his Saab the night before. He spoke to the receptionist and asked if his car was ready. While he was put on hold, he watched Shane and Melissa again. Shane was comparing the cellphone screen with something he had drawn on the back page of magazine.

The receptionist told Jesse the Saab was ready but that they were closing soon. He said he would try to pick the car up today.

He went back into his father's room and said good-bye, explaining he was leaving to pick up his car. He would call later that evening. Carole's eyebrow arched again, as if to display the fact that Jesse was always running away to do something else, never taking responsibility, only making an appearance. Jesse had spent almost two hours at the hospital, and none of it alone with his father because Carole would not vacate the room, assuming that Jesse would attempt to hatch a plot to get his father to divorce her and leave her penniless. On his way out he refused to take a last look

back, not wanting to fix a memory in his mind of his father in a hospital bed.

In the lobby, Jesse made small talk with Melissa and Shane. Shane had drawn a small but flattering portrait of Jesse's step-sister, similar to a photo he had taken with his cellphone camera. "You should keep this," Jesse told Melissa. "It makes you look pretty."

Melissa pouted her lips and showed that she did not appreciate the edge to Jesse's remark. She agreed it was a nice portrait, rapidly blinking her eyes at Shane to show her appreciation. Shane had drawn the necklace Melissa was wearing, a diamond set with sapphires in a design similar to her mother's new ring. Jesse thought the two women must have devised a plan to draw down the joint bank balance.

"Nice jewels," Jesse said. He didn't mean her cleavage and his stepsister knew it.

"Mom gave it to me," she said.

No, Dad bought it for you. Only he doesn't know it. Jesse told Shane his car was ready. He wanted to pick it up before the dealer closed. Melissa stood to say good-bye, not to Jesse, but Shane.

On his way down the hall Jesse felt older, no longer the son, but an invisible adult. His feet were heavy again. He plodded toward the elevator, his head bowed, his mouth loose and slack. Melissa followed Shane. While Jesse waited for the elevator to arrive, Shane put in a few last words with her. "Think about it," Shane said. "You can text message and send your pic. And it's razor thin. Light as air. Lots of different colors, too. You could get one to match your outfit. Or your eyes."

* * *

The secret, Adam believed, was not that there was one God better than another, or many gods with different responsibilities, but that God—or the Goddess or Higher Power or Über Ego, whatever term was fashionable at the moment—allowed a person to be both a similar and distinct individual, in the same way that two snowflakes were never the same. It was not a sentiment that Adam preached,

but held in his mind daily as the truth of his life. Behind it was the reason why he got up out of bed to go to work in the morning, sat with patients and parents and other physicians at the hospital, why he was able to so easily forgive Jesse for his cravings, orders, and arguments—he was simply a snowflake, shaped similar but distinct. God allowed him to be the way he was. And God had created Jesse to be the devil Adam loved, hated, and endured.

In Gina's hospital room, Adam drew the heavy plastic curtain around the bed to create a private space to talk with her. "Can I tell you a secret?" he asked her when he sat down in the chair beside her bed. She was watching television. She gave him an expression that she did not agree or disagree. The thin bar piercing her right eyebrow had been removed. Her dark hair was stringy and greasy, but the red dyed streak she wore across her brow was still visible and tucked behind her ear. Adam took the television remote from her hand, and turned the television off.

"Ever since I was eight years old I sang in my church choir," he began. "I learned to play the piano and I looked forward to choir practices every Wednesday night and singing in church on Sunday morning. We got to wear these long swishy silk choir robes on Sundays. At Christmas time we used handbells and triangles and drums and all sorts of strange instruments. By the time I was twelve the church had grown so large that they hired an assistant pastor who was specifically in charge of the music during the services. He was a real handsome guy. Everyone had a crush on him. His name was Reverend Mike. That's what everyone called him. He liked doing folksy music so I learned to play guitar. It wasn't as easy as the piano, but I kept it up and could do a few chords in almost no time. He started a youth choir, so all of us kids who used to sing with the adults now got to show off even more on Sundays with our guitars and long hair."

He laughed. "I know it must be hard to imagine, but I had long wavy hair when I was a teenager.

"Reverend Mike was there about two years and I had really shot up so tall that I thought I wanted to do sports more than I did singing in the choir, but I kept up with both and my grades. Then that spring, Reverend Mike took the youth choir on a weekend

retreat to a camp in north Georgia. We all got to stay in cabins and sleep in bunks. I got to stay in Reverend Mike's cabin with him because he told me I was special because I was one of the older kids. I wanted to stay with him too because I looked up to him. But I didn't expect some things to happen that happened. It was very shocking to me but I did nothing to prevent it. He told me that it was our secret, just between us, and that we couldn't share it with anyone else because they wouldn't understand the way we felt or what we did. I let it happen a few more times at the church, after choir practice. Then I stopped going to choir practice. I was angry and confused. I knew what had happened was wrong, but how I had felt about it was right. It caused me to be very difficult and depressed for a long time because I didn't have anyone to talk about it with. My dad hated going to church. Hated that I was in the choir. I didn't know what to do. What was right. Only what felt right to me.

"What I'm trying to say is, that the world is a little bit different now. We have people we can talk to about these sorts of things, and they can understand them and help us out with them. We don't have to keep secrets or feel ashamed, so you can talk to me about whatever you are feeling or why you are upset or depressed or angry."

"What happened to him?" Gina asked.

"Reverend Mike? He moved away. Eventually there were some complaints and he left. He made me realize that I was gay, but I had to keep it secret for such a long time. I was afraid to tell my parents. I was ashamed to tell my friends. I didn't understand a lot of things about myself."

Gina looked away from Adam, up at the darkened television set. Adam knew he had given her enough to think about and that talking with her any more would be pushing her to confide in him. He wanted her to make that decision herself. He turned the television back on and handed her the remote. She flipped through the channels.

"I'll stop by tomorrow morning before they release you," he said. "I'm going to put you on an antidepressant to see how you respond.

Your mom is going to bring you to see me after school on Tuesday. If you want, write down all the stuff you want to talk about, or if you don't want to talk that much, then write some of it down for me to read."

She kept the channel on a program that was showing a short video of a grandmother dancing at a wedding and slipping to the floor. She laughed and Adam said, "I like the pet ones with the talking dogs and cats crashing into the glass windows."

Gina smiled. She glanced at Adam and he held her eyes briefly.

"My dad doesn't like you," she said.

"My dad hated me too," Adam answered. "But once he got used to who I was he didn't hate me as much. He knew there wasn't anything wrong with liking me just a little."

* * *

In the parking lot, Shane started the car. The hatchback rumbled and whined and chugged into silence. He turned the ignition switch and it went through the same sounds, followed by a hissing beneath the hood. "That doesn't sound good," Jesse said. "Why don't you call Triple A?"

Worried, Shane widened his eyes and said, "It's not my car."

Before Jesse could react, the young man had reached into his pants pocket, flipped open his cellphone, and was standing outside the car, talking to someone he kept calling, "Dude. Dude. *Dude*."

Jesse used his own cellphone to call the car service he occasionally used for trips to the airport or home from the city, a service he had found when he was a travel planner. The dispatcher said she could get a car in a half-hour. It would be an expensive trip, but it would make the rest of the day easier. He tapped on the car windshield and told Shane, "It's no problem. I've got a car service coming to pick me up."

Shane returned to his phone call. A few minutes later he was sitting inside the car with Jesse, apologizing.

"It's my friend Paul's car," Shane said. "He just uses it to get back and forth to his job. I guess this was too far. I'm really sorry about

this. He's gonna come out with his brother to work on it."

Jesse again said it wasn't a problem. It surprised him that he was handling the situation so calmly. Had it been Adam, not Shane, Jesse would have created a tantrum and provoked a fight, shouting accusations and complaints until they were close to hitting each other. He wasn't even worried about all his errands ahead. He thought his milder manner must be because he didn't want to get Shane flustered or upset. He saw this as their first test as a couple. Would they survive this? Could they move beyond this tiny little meaningless setback? *Honey, it will be okay. Everything will be fine.*

"I'm real sorry about this, man," Shane said. "I can get you a rock bottom deal on a widescreen TV. I bet I can even throw in some DVDs for nothing."

"It's not a big deal," Jesse said. "Cars break down. People get sick. We learn to adapt and change."

Even Jesse couldn't believe he had said that. What he had wanted to do was to draw the young man to his chest, pat his beautiful bald scalp, say it was okay, and wipe away his hot, steaming tears. Then he would lift the young man's chin up with his finger and draw him into a deep, passionate and forgiving kiss. *If only.*

"You'll put in a good word to the doc, won't you?"

"*The doc?*" Jesse said, startled and rattled. Had all this been for Jesse to put in a good word with the doc? *Adam?*

"Listen, I know a way you could do the doc a huge favor," Jesse said. "Pay him back. His car is ready. I need someone to get it from the dealer's back to the house."

"The Carrera?" Shane asked, his mouth forming a small astonished circle. "The doc would be okay with this?"

"Well, let's give him a call and see."

Jesse dialed Adam's cellphone and was dumped into voicemail. "Adam, I'm here with your new business partner Shane, that nice young man from your gym. He's been doing me some favors today—driving me to the hospital to see my dad because you weren't around, and now both of our cars are ready to be picked up. The Saab and the Porsche. I can't be in two places at once and I know you don't want to incur all those extra rental car costs, so I've asked Shane

to help me out with picking up your car and driving it back to the house. I'm sure you don't have any problems with this. And guess what? He's even going to get us a deal on a new plasma TV! *Ciao*."

"See," Jesse said to Shane. "No problem. The Porsche is half mine, after all. And my half says you can drive it back to the house. Call your friend and tell him that you're riding back with me in the car service. I'll drop you off at the Porsche dealer. Have him or his brother pick you up at our place. I need to get back sooner than later. I have to run some errands. We've got guests coming over for dinner tonight."

Shane opened his cellphone and dialed a number. "Dude," he said and stepped outside the car again. "Dude, help me out with this."

* * *

"What do you suggest, Dr. O'Donnell?"

It was Mr. Russo, approaching Adam as he waited for the hospital elevator. He was a heavyset man in his late thirties, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Keep listening," Adam said. "Keep talking. Be open."

"And what about God? Should I forget him?"

"Of course not. But I don't believe God is judgmental, nor would I expect he would want you to be."

"You sound like my wife. Did she tell you we've separated?"

"No. I'm sorry to hear that."

"She's lost her faith. And her faith in us."

Adam didn't say what he was thinking, "You're wife's a smart woman," because it was sure to be misconstrued. His days at the hospital were always spent watching what he said. To patients. Parents. Families. Staff. Don't interject an opinion, only give an analysis. Let them see you as a walking textbook. Opinions and repressed anger would wait and fall on Jesse. Jesse bore the brunt of Adam's professionalism. They both knew that. Jesse was Adam's dumping spot, patient after patient after patient. Adam knew it was unfair, but he needed Jesse for this. It helped keep him detached, professional.

"I can suggest a marriage counselor, if you'd like me to. Or I'd

be glad to meet with you and your wife to talk over what issues you are having."

Adam imagined Russo was the son of blue-collar workers who were the children of blue-collar workers themselves. Children, men, adults emasculated from their labor jobs and forced by the economy into the retail sector, now working as assistant managers at department stores or fast-food chains.

"What do you know about marriage?" Russo asked him.

The insult hit Adam like a slap in the face. He was unprepared when Russo next said, "What do you know about *children*?"

"Children?" Adam echoed, suppressing his anger. "I was a child once. I know what it means to have a father unwilling to bend."

Adam was sixteen when he told his father he was gay. He had rehearsed his speech while he had been mowing the front lawn. He went inside the house and found his father lying on the sofa, watching a baseball game on television, and said, "Dad, I'm gay," in a voice loud enough to be heard over the announcer.

His father reacted swiftly, faster than Adam could have imagined. A hand reached up and clutched Adam's T-shirt, while the other was slapped hard against his left jaw.

"You're not," his father said. "You're not that way. You hear me?"

The slap left Adam silent, unable to speak.

"I never want to hear that in this house again, young man. Never talk like that again. Not to me. Or to your mother. You are not that way."

Adam resisted his urge to walk away from Mr. Russo, the same way he had resisted his father and repeated his declaration. "And *marriage*?" Adam answered. "I believe my track record speaks for itself, Mr. Russo. I've been in a committed relationship for twenty-four years. I struggle every day to make it work."

* * *

Four anniversaries ago, on a trip to Asia, Jesse befriended the concierge at their hotel in Tokyo, a tall Australian fellow named Noel with sandy-colored hair and blue eyes. In Jesse's mind, Noel was a dreamboat, the perfect catch, a man he could easily leave

Adam for. After checking in, Jesse showered, put on his best clothes, combed his hair just right, and went down and asked for directions to a museum Adam wanted to visit.

Noel explained the directions to the museum, a walk and a subway ride away, and wrote down the museum's address in Japanese on a card and the hotel's address and phone number on the reverse side.

"It's a daunting city," Noel told Jesse. "You can get easily lost. Maps are useless. Most taxi drivers don't even know all the streets. If you get lost point to the Japanese address of the museum for the driver, or the hotel, if you're on your way back. We recommend all our guests do this."

Jesse wasn't ready to let Noel go so soon. He could easily make small talk with this fellow.

"Is the weather always this hot?" he smiled and batted his eyes.

"It's notoriously humid, yes sir."

Jesse asked Noel for the Japanese pronunciations for "water" and "toilet." By now he was certain Noel was gay. Something about his eyes, his posture, his athletic build. (And the fact that Jesse was already in love with him, whether he was gay *or* straight.)

"What else do you recommend while we're in the city?" Jesse asked.

Using a map, Noel explained where a park with a temple and a street fair would be a close walk to the museum.

"My friend and I wanted to see Shinjuku," Jesse said. "Can you recommend a place to eat?"

Noel suggested several places where tourists went and one that was off the beaten track. Meals could be ordered by pointing to pictures on the menu. "And many of the gay bars are along here," Noel said next, pointing to a street on the map.

Jesse did not protest Noel's assumption that he was gay. In fact, Jesse was delighted it was out in the open. Now, everything could be so much easier. And obvious.

"One here is where many Americans go," Noel said. "The others are much smaller. And you would need to be invited to them."

"Invited?"

"They're like private clubs. With members."

"You're so helpful," Jesse gushed. Yes, he gushed at Noel. A girlish gush that would have made his mother cringe. "I wish you could come along with us. What time do you get off? Let us take you to dinner."

As it was, Noel was free. He accepted the invitation for dinner and would escort Jesse and Adam to Shinjuku.

Adam did not put up any resistance to the plan. He had taken a good look at Noel, too, when they were checking in.

At dinner they both quizzed and flirted with Noel. How long had he worked in Tokyo? ("Almost two years, before that Singapore and Hong Kong.") Did he have a boyfriend? ("Yes, Steven, a hairdresser.") "Was he Asian?" ("Yes and No. A Chinese mother, British father." Noel had met him in Hong Kong.) How long had they been together? ("Two years." But Steven didn't like Tokyo, felt he was being discriminated against because he was gay and Chinese. They would probably move again soon. "Maybe Sydney," Noel said. "I'm feeling a bit homesick.")

Adam was annoyed that Jesse was fawning all over Noel. He was complimenting his clothes, asking where Noel shopped. It was as if Adam were not even at the table. Jesse detected Adam's annoyance. He was ready to leave Adam behind and go off on his own adventure with Noel.

After dinner they went to the "American" bar in the gay district. It reminded Jesse of the bar he often went to on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Adam wondered if the bartender was Thai, not Japanese. He reminded Adam of Erik.

They stayed for a round of drinks, Noel serving as a translator for a group of Japanese businessmen asking questions about Adam's height and white hair. Jesse exchanged a few words with an overweight American from Chicago, a tourist who was finding the country rude. ("*They don't even look you in the eyes!*" he complained to Jesse.)

One of the Japanese businessmen had an invitation to a smaller, members-only gay bar a block away. He offered to take Adam and Noel. And Jesse, too, when he was discovered to be part of the group, though Jesse suspected there was a bit of hesitation. Or reluctance.

The bar was on the sixth floor of a building. They rode up an elevator, walked down a hallway and buzzed a door. Inside was a small room, with an L-shaped bar with a counter and space to stand. There were two other men in suits, both Japanese, inside the room.

After some discussion at the door between the bartender, the businessman, and Noel, they entered and ordered drinks. Jesse was immediately bored. The businessman was monopolizing Noel and Noel was whispering something to Adam.

"Mr. Otsuji here wants an adventure tonight," Noel broke away from the conversation and said to Jesse. "A three-way."

"A *three-way*?" Jesse answered. "Adam and I have never had a three-way together."

Adam and Noel shared a look. "He wants me and Noel," Adam said, with a slight smirk.

Jesse did not even pause dramatically. "And you want to do it?"

Adam did not respond, but Jesse took his lack of answer to mean, yes, of course, Adam wanted to do it. Why wouldn't he? It was *his* adventure now.

A fight erupted. "You would just leave me stranded here in the middle of nowhere? In a foreign country?"

"Of course not," Adam said. "We were all going back to the hotel."

"The hotel? You would just do it under my nose? On our vacation? *Our anniversary?*"

"Jesse, I didn't say yes."

"But you didn't say no."

"Don't turn this into an international incident," Adam said. "You've been flirting all night with Noel. Have I objected to that?"

"Flirting," Jesse said. "There's a difference."

"Only when you want there to be one."

The bartender asked them to leave the bar, or, rather, asked Jesse to leave the bar. It was all communicated in Japanese to the businessman. Which Noel translated.

Jesse and Adam both saw that evening as the beginning of the end. And they both wondered what they would find at the end. Sex? Freedom? Loneliness? Love?

* * *

Shane sat up front beside the driver. Suni, a young Asian-American woman with long black hair and pale skin, had driven Jesse before from Newark airport to the house. The mother of a four-year old, Suni and her boyfriend worked as part-time limo drivers to earn extra money.

The first few miles Jesse competed with her for Shane's attention. He wasn't winning so he changed his strategy, ignoring Shane to make him jealous of his prior history with Suni. Jesse asked Suni if she was still planning to homeschool her son instead of enrolling him in day care, if she ever took Kal with her on airport trips to watch the planes, like Jesse's father had done decades and decades before when he and Ben had stayed at his Nana's house in Miami. It was one thing to feel jealous and threatened by a shirtless gay man with a buff bod dancing on a Pride float, Jesse thought, but of a beautiful young mother in skin-tight clothes driving a black sedan?

Shane gushed and fawned and complimented Suni—"You've got a kid? *No way!* You have to be a dancer with that body! You look just like the dancer I met with my friend Paul! What kind of aerobics do you do? I bet you can do gymnastics and all those flips. Can you do back flips?"

Jesse was surprised by Suni's reaction. Her behavior was downright coquettish. She purred her answers and tossed her hair. Jesse wanted to tap her on the shoulder and say, "Excuse me, but what would your boyfriend think about this—flirting with a customer?" A young, single teenage customer full of hormonal bravado? But Jesse was more annoyed with Shane's behavior. Yes, *annoyed*. He resented the blatant display of heterosexual lust. *This love affair is over*, Jesse thought. *We are through. Over! Separated. Divorced.* Shane had spurned him for another lover. *And a woman!*

When Shane began asking Suni what sort of music she liked to listen to and telling her she could listen to a whole channel of "oldies from the Fifties—Elvis Presley and all that shit" on a satellite radio, Jesse took the opportunity to study his ex-lover's profile, wondering

if he should put up a fight. *A fight?* he thought. Someone *else* to fight with? Affection in the guise of impatience?

"You probably spend as much time in this car alone as you do with a client," Shane said. "I can get you a great deal on a satellite radio subscription. Could even get you a plug-and-play unit. Don't matter what car you're driving!"

The boy doesn't stop, does he? Jesse thought. *One hustle after the next.* Perhaps that's why Jesse had loved him so immediately. Shane was the kind of man he could never be. Selling himself as much as his product. And now he was history. *Gone*. Like all the others before him. Jesse craved one last final embrace. Like Bogey and Bergman in *Casablanca* before they parted.

Outside, on the highway, the traffic had thinned. Jesse's view was of the flat planes of road, banks of ground, and sky. It started to rain. A misty sort of sprinkle. Jesse knew his father's health was creating another crisis and it was time for him to grow up and change. *Change? No, not change. Refocus*. Jesse had to shift his worrying—that wasted energy—toward something else. And not toward Adam. He knew it was unfair to keep beating up on Adam for everything that had failed in his life. Clay's death had sent Jesse into a midlife crisis that had now lasted more than fifteen years—one fear after the next—fear of dying, fear of being unhappy, fear of failure, fear of being alone. He knew it was time to get back to work, find a career. *Or at least an outlet.* Something that could consume him, stop his silly obsessions.

Jesse dug his cellphone out of his pants pock and dialed Peter.

"Have your outfit decided for tonight?" Jesse asked, when Peter answered. "Maybe we can ditch our lovers and go out clubbing."

Peter laughed, which sounded more like a throaty cough, and he told Jesse that he had spent the morning watching *Lover Come Back*. "I know how you love Doris," Peter said, which was followed by another throaty laugh. Or cough. Jesse knew it was best to overlook any concerns over Peter's health, his questions were usually deflected or met with monosyllable answers. Peter had built protective boundaries around his serostatus, one of that generation of gay men who did not wish to disclose their being positive or

discuss their viral load, defining the type of friendship Jesse could expect with him. *No fretting, no worrying, no advice. Let me take care of all that myself.* Jesse always felt slightly disappointed by Peter's stance, Jesse's own need to complain repressed into muted blessings and thanks for having been spared this disease himself.

"One of my favorites," Jesse said. "I think I like it better than *Pillow Talk*."

"Gowns by Irene," Peter added. "Before she leapt to her death."

They spoke some more about the movie, about Doris Day's outfits, about the dinner party later that evening, about Adam's whereabouts—"At the hospital, some kind of emergency."—and the new weekend clerk Matt had hired for his antique shop in Stockton. "Jailbait. Truly dreamy."

Jesse wanted to tell Peter that he was spending time with a young heartbreaker right now, too, but didn't feel it was appropriate to throw Shane into an embarrassing position or interrupt his flirting with Suni. Jesse rattled off the menu he was preparing for the dinner and asked if Peter wanted anything else special. It was met with another coughing jag and Jesse said good-bye and hung up.

Jesse listened to the whine of the tires on the wet highway and Shane's wooing gasps. He closed his eyes and fell into a light nap. There was a brief dream that he was back home in bed and Adam was asleep beside him. He woke when he realized he was dribbling and snoring. He laughed at himself for turning into such an old man, surprised that Shane was not offering Suni a deal on a white noise system to block out the sound of her elderly snoring passengers.

Jesse's stomach rumbled. He realized he was famished. He hadn't eaten anything all day. "Suni, take this exit," he leaned forward and told the driver. "I'll treat everyone to ice cream."

* * *

It was a shameless display of infatuation, Shane leaning into the sedan window talking to Suni while he waited for Jesse to drive the Saab around the parking lot, his pale fleshy skull contrasting to her dark hair. They reminded Jesse of a pair of salt and pepper shakers

his Nana had kept on her kitchen shelf, of Eskimos wearing hooded ponchos with painted hair and smiles. Jesse tapped the car horn. Shane looked in the direction of the Saab, caught Jesse's eye, and raised a finger to indicate he would be there soon. *A finger. To wait. To me.*

Suni ran her fingers through her long black hair, as if to flirt and taunt Shane a little bit more. She was a vixen right after Jesse's own heart. Shane leaned in a little bit further, and Jesse imagined the young man's muscles tense and flex—the jaw, the triceps, the thigh and buttock deep with indentations. Above, the sky was dark with anticipation, the rain was going to come down hard at any moment. Jesse looked at his watch, his gas meter, and oil gauge in order to avoid the heartbreak of watching Shane with Suni.

"Nice car," Shane said, when he slid into the Saab. "What was wrong with it?"

"Needed new tires," Jesse said.

The tap, tap, tap of heavy raindrops had begun on the windshield. Shane, damp from his short jaunt to the Saab, reddened. Jesse remembered that Shane had spent time with Adam yesterday and he might have had some sort of hand in the tire slashing—it was just the kind of thing that Adam would do or would put someone up to do for him—so he could pass the lie detector and fool the jury. "No, sir. I didn't slash a single tire on Jesse's car. Not me. No way. I am not guilty at all, your honor."

Jesse rushed through a number of quiet emotions and corrections—anger, breathing, irritation, breathing—and ended with yearning to stretch out his hand and tell Shane that it was okay, he forgave him, which he repressed by fumbling with the controls to adjust the position of the driver's seat, which had been realigned by a mechanic.

The Porsche dealer was less than a mile away. At the small café they drove by, diners had abandoned the outdoor tables and were huddled under an awning, looking up at the darkening sky and the rain. Inside the car it was silent, except for the rhythmic swishing sound the windshield wipers made as the plastic wands ran across the wet glass.

Jesse parked the Saab, paid the bill for the Porsche, and waited with Shane while a mechanic brought the Carrera to the parking lot.

"Driver's license?" Jesse asked Shane while they rain bubbled into puddles like boiling water.

"What?"

"You've got a driver's license, right?"

Jesse motioned that he wanted to see it. Shane pulled out his wallet out and handed the license to Jesse.

"Nice picture," Jesse said, looking from the license to Shane's face. In the photograph, Shane had hair—thick, rich, luxurious, chestnut brown hair. Jesse also took the opportunity to check something he had been bashful about asking Shane about—his age. *Twenty.* The guy was twenty. Five ten. One-hundred seventy-five pounds. Green eyes and beautiful chestnut brown hair. *Which he shaved away.*

It would have never worked out, Jesse thought. *I could never leave Adam for a guy who shaved his hair away.*

Jesse handed the license back to Shane. "Not for my benefit, of course," Jesse said. "For the doc. I know he will ask me."

"The doc's okay with this, right?" Shane asked.

"Of course," Jesse answered. "He's fine with it because I am. What's mine is his. Trust me, we've spent twenty-four *blissful* years sorting it all out."

From the sidewalk Jesse waited while Shane adjusted himself into the driver's seat of the Porsche, strapped on the seatbelt, and started up the car. There was a moment where Shane studied the control panel of the Porsche and the windshield wipers flipped on.

"Take your time," Jesse yelled into the rain. "Keep it till the rain stops and then put the top down. Have a little fun before you drop it off at the house."

Shane lifted his thumb up in the air to show his pleasure. *Sheer nervous youthful pleasure,* Jesse thought. It didn't take a psychiatrist to figure that one out. Adam would be furious that Jesse had let someone else drive the Porsche. He raced through the pouring rain toward the Saab. *So long, my love. Now it's your turn to break Adam's heart.*

* * *

Jesse remembered, as he drove along Route 22 in the rain, an evening last week when he and Adam were both in bed watching a show on the Food Channel. It was a program on "Why We Love The Foods We Do." There were segments on grilled cheese sandwiches, ice cream sundaes, apple pies, and potato chips. A dietician was interviewed about why some people had cravings for chocolate. "Chocolate is not a member of any food group," she said. "It symbolizes an escape from day-to-day drudgery. It triggers almost every appetite chemical in the brain." The dietician appeared to be the sort of woman who was once fat but was now thinner. She used a lot of medical terms and acronyms to explain the effects of chocolate on the brain. At the end of her segment, she turned silly and said, "There is also an emotional craving for chocolate. Women often receive chocolates as gifts, forming a link between chocolate and love. It's easy to indulge in a piece of chocolate. Sometimes we use it as a substitute for something we are missing in our lives."

Jesse, suddenly craving a piece of chocolate, said, "That's me. Hungry for love."

"Maybe you just need more testosterone," Adam answered.

Had it not been so late, it could have started another fight.

Jesse was thinking about the TV show and chocolate again when he pulled into Michelle's driveway and tapped his horn. Michelle always had something new for him to try. In her kitchen she handed Jesse a small cupcake covered with chocolate icing.

"Divine," Jesse said, rolling his eyes as bursts of sugar and cake swirled around his mouth.

"Be honest," Michelle answered. "Not too much butter?"

"It's perfection."

Michelle was in her mid-forties, a divorced mom who lived with her son and two dogs in a small house in Riegelsville where she ran a boutique cake-decorating business. Jesse had known her when she had been an out-of-work actress behind the counter at a bakery in Greenwich Village, not far from his apartment. Jesse had recommended Michelle to Carole when she was planning the

wedding to Jesse's father, a mistake Jesse still regretted and felt compelled to apologize about. (Carole had been too vague about what she wanted, making Michelle submit several designs and redo the finished cake the day of the reception. Michelle was determined to please her customer, believing in the end that Carole would provide recommendations for future work, even though she had baked away any sort of profit.) "I don't like saying bad things about people," Michelle had said when the wedding reception was finally over, "but that woman's got an evil spirit poking up her hind end."

Jesse made up for the fiasco by inviting Michelle and her then eight-year-old son out to their country house for summer weekends. Michelle fell in love with the area, and was soon another expatriate from the city.

Jesse also used his visits with Michelle to solicit her advice, as if she were his oracle.

"I have a friend who's been in a long, long, long relationship," he might ask. "He thinks his boyfriend is in love with a bodybuilder with twenty-eight-inch arms."

"Twenty-eight inches? Is he a giant?"

"Okay, well, big arms."

"How long have these boyfriends been together?"

"Twenty-four years," Jesse would answer. "In gay time, that's longer than forever."

"Twenty-four years," Michelle echoed back to Jesse. "That's nothing to sneeze about."

"What would you do about the elephant in the room?—the bodybuilder with huge arms—what would you do if your boyfriend of forever wouldn't admit his infatuation with his trainer?"

"I'd say he was trying to save your friend some pain," Michelle answered. "Would your friend care if his partner was having an affair?"

"No, not really… If it gave him some happiness. And he didn't leave me… Leave my friend. Do you think my friend has wasted twenty-four years?"

"Is that how you feel?"

"All I need is one sign," Jesse said that afternoon, looking at the

cake Michelle had made for Matt and Peter's anniversary. It was a vanilla cake with buttercream icing in the shape of a house similar to the one Matt and Peter owned in Warner Township, not far from Adam and Jesse's place. In front of the cake house was a small welcome mat which read, "Happy Anniversary, Matt and Peter."

"One sign. One miserable little thing to cling to. One little thing to show me he cares. Will it ever happen? Will he ever give me that one little itty-bitty crumb?" Jesse asked Michelle.

"You shouldn't cast your expectations so high," she answered. "You're setting yourself up for disappointment."

Jesse continued his compliments about the cake. "If he'd only give me something as divine as this!" So many compliments, in fact, that Michelle offered him another treat, another little dance they always went through when they were together. It was another cupcake, this one with chocolate cake and vanilla icing.

"Let me know when you want to go national," Jesse said.

"You're just teasing me," Michelle said. "I know you're not serious."

He smiled and knew it was only a little bit true. When he had visited Michelle at the bakery on Bedford Street in the city, he had sat at a café table and told her the same thing. He'd helped Michelle set up her small shoppe in Riegelsville and found her many of her first clients in the area. He'd always fantasized that if he went back to work, it would be with Michelle. There was something delicious and artistic about her career. And rewarding. She was always getting compliments. It was a perfect job for a former actress. And a perfect job for Jesse to fantasize about becoming a part of. "But if you ever do want to expand, please let me know," he said. "I'll line up all the investors for you. I'll even come work for you. I bet my cakes would be divine. My Nana taught me how to make an apricot *rugelah* that's out of this world."

"I couldn't have you in the store every day," she said, laughing and boxing up the cake for him to carry out to his car. "You'd be miserable. And you'd eat up all my profits."

* * *

In his office, Adam made some notes in his files, read through the mail he had missed on Friday, and answered e-mails. When he was ready to leave, he checked his cellphone messages and listened to Jesse's voicemail.

His neck muscles tensed when he heard about Jesse's arrangements to have Shane pick up the Porsche. *Why did he have to involve Shane? What was Shane doing with Jesse anyway? Why was Jesse always trying to manipulate everything?* Adam imagined Jesse unleashing one of his tirades and listing all of Adam's faults, trying to destroy any kind of friendship Adam had begun with the young man.

Where did all this meanness come from? Jesse was not the kind of man who chased down aggressive motorists, stamped on ant hills, littered the highway or rest stops. Their friends loved Jesse. Jesse donated his skinny clothes to the Salvation Army—he was the first person to write a check to sponsor someone in the AIDS Ride or Breast Cancer Marathon. So why was he so spiteful toward Adam?

And why did Adam let it bother him so much?

Jealousy, Adam decided. They were both jealous, without an outlet of communication between them except a fight. *Yes, that was it.* Adam was out and out jealous that Jesse had latched on to Shane, because Jesse was trying to get back at Adam about something he was angry or jealous about—the tires? A fight? Big Donnie?

He had to find a way to break this behavior. Jesse's. And his own. They would just take it out on each other. *Forever and ever and ever.* He tapped through the directory of his cellphone and called Wade.

"Too late to make an appointment for today?" he asked when Wade answered.

"I think I can hang around a little longer for you, Dr. O'Donnell," Wade said. "I've got one last patient and then I can see you. About an hour?"

Adam found Wade's deep, level monotone immediately reassuring. "You're gonna go out in this mess?" Wade asked.

Adam looked out his office window. He had completely ignored

the change in the weather. Outside, heavy rain and a strong wind blew the bushes and trees toward the ground. The rain thumped against the glass. Below, the parking lot was scattered with puddles and fallen leaves.

"Have to make my way home sometime," Adam said.

"I'll be here."

When he hung up Adam called Jesse. He left a message telling Jesse when to pick him up at the car rental agency and drive him home.

* * *

Jesse's fury returned when he entered the house and discovered the mess in the kitchen. Plates with uneaten quiche and smashed fruit were piled up on the kitchen counter. The milk and butter had been left out. Something had dried and crusted inside the blender. A horrible stench clouded the room, which he discovered was coming from paper towels inside the trash bin. He opened the sliding glass door to the porch to let some fresh air in. He watched the rain, hoping it might tame his rage. Twenty-four years. Twenty-four years of being a maid and butler and janitor and cook and nurse and secretary to an ungrateful spouse. Twenty-four years of waste and unhappiness. A *hausfrau*. "If you're so unhappy, leave him," Jesse's brother Ben had said to him. "It's not that easy," Jesse had answered. "It's not so black and white. It's not do I love him or do I hate him. It's a complicated in between."

And who else would put up with him? *At this age and weight?* The man Jesse had become? Jesse knew that the last thing he wanted to be was someone who was alone.

The next half hour Jesse cleaned the kitchen, singing along to a Streisand CD, interrupted only by a streak of lightning he saw through the front windows. He made lists in his head of things to do before the party. Before going upstairs to shower, he checked his voicemail and heard Adam's message about picking him up later at the car rental agency. He had close to an hour before setting out from the house.

Upstairs, in the small room in the attic that Jesse used as an office, he checked his e-mails, answering messages from Stuart, saying it was good to catch up, and Robyn, asking if anything was needed at the party tonight. ("Not a thing, darling," he wrote, "Except your lovely presence.") He spent a few minutes in a chat room checking out the profiles of BucksDude4U and SEPA10, but the experience with Nico the night before left him reluctant to initiate a dialogue or respond when NH007 sent an instant message asking, "What's up, JBoiy?"

Jesse was a bit fearful of the Internet's power to provide an immediate sexual hookup, not that he had ever had that much luck from it, and, when he did, it was usually more disappointing than rewarding. Mostly, now, he used his computer as a way to flirt and tease and taunt. In cyberspace, he could be young and tall and thin and overly endowed.

"Just hanging out," he typed back to NH007. "Letting it hang."

"Sounds hot."

"Heavy and ready."

"Nice stats."

"U 2."

"U Lone?"

"Y."

"Need some company?"

Always, Jesse thought. But was it *good* company? "Pix 2 trade?"

Jesse waited for a response, then waited a bit more. When nothing arrived, no photograph, no e-mail, no instant message, he shut down the computer and headed to the bathroom.

Undressed and standing in front of the mirror, he was appalled to find the lines still on his body from the liposculpture appointment the day before. Jesse traced the lines around his stomach and waist and laughed. He wished he had remembered that beneath this fleshy mass was a thinner physique waiting to happen. *The New and Improved Me! Now with More Attitude!* Jesse wrapped a large bath towel around himself and posed in front of the mirror as if he were being photographed for a magazine layout, his head tilted back to firm his neckline, his arm tossed skyward as if he were holding the

longest last note possible of a song.

While he shaved, Jesse deliberated about wearing his favorite blue shirt or a new sweater. It was a silly conundrum, but it made him aware of the string of decisions and choices he had made in his life. What if he had finished law school? What if he had gone to a different bar and never met Clay? What if his Broadway show had been a hit? What if Clay were alive? His mother nice? His father well? Adam supportive?

For a moment Jesse only wished he was a more flamboyant dresser. He'd never been the kind of man to experiment with spiky hair, or chain-link jewelry, or body piercings and tattoos. He studied his scalp and wondered what he would look like bald. The thought horrified him. *What about a wig?* He'd never attempted drag—his mother had beaten away the desire when she had discovered him at six wearing her lipstick and wobbling around in her good heels. The time in high school when he had been cast as Hero in *Forum* he had begged the choral director to let him wear jeans beneath the skimpy tunic he had been asked to wear so that his mother would not ridicule him when she came to see the show. Matt and Peter had often suggested that Jesse and Adam throw a Halloween party and have their guests arrive in costume, but even this notion seemed haunted by Jesse's mother disapproval. One year Jesse had wanted to dress up as a fairy princess; she had screamed that it was impossible because he was a little *boy*, not a girl. During Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Jesse and Adam had been invited by friends to a krewe ball. Jesse had dressed as a sailor—not much of a costume, but it had still made him feel like a fake. He could only imagine his mother's surprise—"A sailor? Oh, honey, you could never pull that off. You're too girly. You'll only be embarrassed by yourself."

Was this, then, his life? *A string of embarrassments? A series of humbling events?*

He was still feeling fragile when he stepped out of the shower and walked to the closet and found the blue shirt. On the bed where he had tossed his towel, he noticed a magazine that Adam must have been reading. He lifted it up to keep it from getting wet from the towel. On the cover was a picture of Madonna leaving a hotel in

Manhattan. It was an issue of the magazine Jesse had not read.

He sat down on the bed, amazed. He checked the issue date to make sure. Adam had bought Jesse something he knew he would appreciate. A simple gift that now tugged his heart.

* * *

Adam had reached the age where each new person he met, reminded him of someone from his past. Charles Conrad, the owner of a gallery in Philadelphia that Adam often went to estate auctions with reminded him of Bryan Chalmers, his junior high school history teacher. His morning nurse Thea reminded him of Lillian Eisenberg, the psychology department secretary when he was an undergraduate in Atlanta. Yves Reclus, the new radiologist, reminded him of the actor Keanu Reeves. Gina reminded him of Naomi Watson, an intern from California that the hospital bureaucracy had tried to tame of her spiky hair, piercings, and jewelry. And Wade Barlow reminded him of Mike Wynters. Reverend Mike. He had the same face, the same jawline and color of eyes, even the same height and physique—slender and over six feet tall. Had it not been for the differences in their ages—and voices—Adam might have imagined them as twins. Wade's voice was laughably different. Reverend Mike's had been light and fluid and musical. Wade's voice was deep and monotonous. Sometimes Adam listened more intently to the tones of Wade's voice than to what he was saying, trying to detect if there was any range or inflection there at all. Something closer to what he remembered.

"I can feel the tension in your shoulders," Wade said. "Jesse bothering you?"

"Partially," Adam answered. He was lying on the massage table at Wade's office, his buttocks draped by a white towel. His clothes were on hangers on the back of the door. Adam had met Wade when he was with Jesse at a party Saul Kestenbaum's wife threw for Saul's fiftieth birthday. Wade was there alone. Jesse and Adam were bickering about the cost of the landscaping Adam wanted to have done around the front of the barn when Adam saw Wade out of the

corner of his eye. Jesse noticed Adam's face go pale and said, "Your new boyfriend? Or your new wanna-be-my-sugar daddy?"

"I thought he was someone else at first," Adam said, continuing to stare at Wade.

Wade's hands worked along Adam's back in outward semicircles. Adam imagined his muscles as threads of taffy being stretched and softened. He closed his eyes, mentally easing his tension. He kept his breathing even and level. Wade was a physical therapist who worked mostly with patients needing rehabilitation. Patients with amputated limbs, victims of car accidents, discharged soldiers.

"I've got a strong stomach," Wade told Adam at Kestenbaum's party. Jesse had drifted off to find Ryan, Kestenbaum's teenage son, who had landed a part in his high school production of *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Wade had been a financial analyst. A decade older than Jesse and Adam, he had moved to Manhattan after business school in St. Louis. He easily adapted to the high-style, super-sex life of many good-looking gay men of his generation, dancing at the Flamingo and the Garage, checking out the action at the Anvil and the Continental baths, and sharing a weekend house in the Pines with his new boyfriend and lover, Kent, an expatriate of Kansas and an editor at *New York* magazine. They were both diagnosed HIV-positive, but Wade held back on beginning medication because he was asymptomatic. Kent was an early casualty of the epidemic. After his death, Wade gave up his business career to become an activist and start nursing school. With his second lover, Bobbie Ratner, he picketed the NIH and FDA and helped streamline the new drug approval process for AIDS medications. When Bobbie died, Wade left the city and rented a house in the Catskills, but moved a year later when he took over the practice of a retiring physical therapist in the Allentown area.

Wade shifted from Adam's lower back to the upper part of his left leg, saying "Roll over onto your side, please," with such a deep voice that Adam felt the vibrations in his chest. Adam never intended to become a client of Wade's; the first appointment had come about when Adam asked if Wade could recommend a licensed

masseur—he was unhappy with the guy at his gym and wanted someone better trained he could see after workouts. It had only been a device Adam had instigated to keep the conversation going between them—a flirt, a test, Adam both trying to sublimate and indicate his attraction to Wade.

"I can do most therapies," Wade said. "Esalen. Jin Shin Do. Myofascial release."

Adam was reluctant to accept Wade's suggestions because of his resemblance to Mike, knowing that the similarity in appearances would add an emotional and sexual complexity to a massage that he should professionally avoid. But he could not reject it—he could not find the willpower to ignore the temptation and refuse the experience.

Wade sketched out their boundaries at Adam's first visit. "Ethics differ per client," he told Adam. "One guy might feel uncomfortable and embarrassed about a sexual reaction to a massage. Another might desire it and see nothing wrong with it. Most of the jocks have issues. So do a lot of the vets that I treat. It took one of my patients—Michael, a guy who lost his leg in Afghanistan—a long time to feel comfortable with me because he knew I was gay and I knew he wasn't. Professionally I'm different with him than I am with another one of my patients, Barry, a guy who has been married for twenty years and just wants to come out big time but doesn't for one reason or another. I guess it's called *therapy* for a reason. Each person comes here for their own motive or challenge and I treat all my clients professionally. If there is something that you feel you want and need, let me know or give me an indication and I will respond if I am comfortable with that."

Wade worked the muscles of Adam's thigh. Adam's erection flapped against the towel. He felt it tap against Wade's knuckles. He ached to reach down and stroke himself. Instead, he breathed deeper and longer. Sweat broke out on his chest and beneath his arms. He knew this was a strange mix of pain and pleasure. Wade turned Adam around so that Adam lay on his back, his eyes pinned at the ceiling, the towel now draped atop his crotch, while Wade worked the muscles of Adam's right leg.

The rain rattled at the window. "Crazy time of year," Wade said. Again, the sound of Wade's voice hit Adam in the chest. "Everything changing. Winter creeping in."

Wade moved to the top of the table. He worked the muscles of Adam's neck. "Keep breathing deeply," Wade said. "Not shallow breaths. *Relax.*"

During Adam's first appointment Adam had achieved an orgasm without any contact to his genitals, an eruption that coincided with a sudden gasp for breath. The constant pressure of Wade's fingers, the unrelenting desire for the attention, and the memory of Mike all conspired to create a little death—a blackout that resumed with a sputter of light and semen. The first night he had bunked with Reverend Mike the same thing had happened. A sudden and unpreventable orgasm before Mike had touched Adam's crotch. Adam had grown up wishing to find a lover who could make him feel that way all the time, until he became smart enough to know better, wise enough to realize that such an imbalance of desire would make him too easily manipulated and governed.

Wade worked on Adam's left arm, then his right, shaking them out and using his fingertips to press and separate the muscles. Adam was lucky to find Wade at about the same time that sex with Jesse began to dwindle to nothing. He kept his relationship with Wade private and professional. The appointments were paid in cash and never submitted to Adam's insurance company. Wade was the one person who was never invited to the parties Adam and Jesse threw. Wade had never shown Adam any indication that he wanted to get together for dinner or a movie or try for a deeper attachment, though Adam, in his fantasies, always found Wade willing and ready.

Adam closed his eyes and tilted his chin up. He tensed his stomach muscles as Wade began working along the sides of his chest. He lifted his buttocks lightly off the table when Wade slipped a rubber glove on his right hand and filled his palm with lubricant. Adam's orgasm was swift and astonishing, exactly as he desired.

* * *

The fight had begun six days earlier. On Sunday night, when Jesse asked Adam to take out the trash.

Adam was lying on the sofa, watching the late news on television. Their dinner guests, April and Jack, a couple who ran a bed and breakfast in Riegelsville, had left. Jesse had finished cleaning up the kitchen when he said, in a soft pleasant voice, "Adam, could you please take the trash out?"

Adam didn't appreciate the polite tone. He took it as an insult and an order.

"I'll do it before I go upstairs," Adam answered.

"Do it now so you don't forget. They pick it up in the morning."

"I will."

"You forgot about it last week."

"That was last week."

Jesse, who had not been in an antagonistic mood when he asked the question, was now. "Never mind, your highness," he said in voice that was higher and more shrill. "Don't bother getting up. Sorry to interrupt your life. I'll take it out myself."

"Can't you ever let me relax?"

Adam's response was the wrong one, as he usually found it was.

"Why? You don't let me relax. I'm always cleaning and dusting and cooking. And all for you. What do you ever do for me? I just asked you to take the trash out and look at you, lying there, watching television."

"I said I'll take it out."

"Don't bother."

Adam, aggravated and unable to concentrate on the news, rose to his feet. It was one thing to fight with your significant other about another guy, or a painting you wanted to buy, or how much he owed for the electric bill, or even about the weight he had added or how they had aged into different men, but to fight over taking out the trash? He was a respected forty-nine-year-old psychiatrist, an expert in autism, pre-adolescent psychology, and crisis behavior. He had lectured at Emory, Northwestern, UCLA, and NYU. He'd written a book about what to do about teens and

destructive addictions, contributed to others about teens in trouble and teens and self-injury. He had been interviewed on the radio and the newspaper about Columbine and taped an interview for a special report by Geraldo Rivera. Had his life been reduced to this? An argument over trash. Where was he going? Where were they headed next? A fight over the laundry?

"You put the bottles in this," Adam said, looking at the trash with the wine bottles they drank at dinner on the top. "Aren't you supposed to separate them out?"

"Nope."

"I thought there was a recycling notice."

"That was Manhattan, twelve years ago."

"I'm not paying any of the fine."

"Then don't."

"And I'm not taking the blame when they don't pick it up. Because of the bottles."

"They will."

Trash, Adam thought next, as he lifted it up out of the pail and tied the top tight with a wire twizzer. *They were fighting about trash. Garbage. Debris. Landfill.* His life had become a battle of Joan Crawford versus Dr. Kildare. Martha Stewart against Marcus Welby.

"Be sure you put the lid on tight so the dogs don't get at it."

"Hankinson locks them up at night. It's raccoons. I told you that."

"Then be sure to put the lid on tight. Make sure it's latched."

"Why don't you come out and check while I do it, your highness?"

"Never mind, never mind," Jesse yelled. "I'll do it myself."

Jesse reached for the bag to take it out of Adam's hand. He grasped it a little too hard and Adam tugged it toward himself to stop it. The bag split apart. The wine bottles, potato rinds, leftover apple pie, and steak bones tumbled onto the kitchen floor.

"Look what you did!" Jesse yelled.

"Me?" Adam threw down his end of the plastic garbage bag and went back to the sofa, stretched out his feet, and pretended to

watch the television.

"When do I ever get to relax?" Jesse yelled next.

"Never," Adam back. "I'll never let you relax. As long as I am breathing you will never have a moment of peace and quiet."

* * *

The fight continued in the car. Adam had dropped off the rental car and was waiting for Jesse to pick him up. Jesse had seen Adam's scowl and the hands on the hips when he turned into the lot.

"You could have done the dishes," Jesse said when Adam opened the door.

"I had an emergency at the hospital."

"Your friends left a mess. The house smells like vomit."

"Baby puke," Adam said and added a grin, not letting Jesse get the better of him. "Donnie came over with the kids."

"I had to make an extra trip to the store to get scented candles."

"I hope you got the kind you like."

"Lotus Blossom Delight. Very girly and feminine. The kind you despise."

"Why did you let Shane pick up the Porsche?"

"Because, darling, I can't drive two cars at once."

"Why didn't you just wait for me?"

"Wait for you? I've been waiting for you for twenty-four years."

"Was Shane driving the Porsche directly to the house?"

"Dunno, why don't you call him?"

Adam buckled his seat belt, but his lack of a quick response betrayed him.

"You don't have his number?"

"I know where he lives."

"He's got *your* number."

"Why did you let him take the Porsche?"

"I thought it was helping you out. Now you don't have to make a trip to the dealer. I worked it all out for you. Aren't I good to you? Can't you at least thank me?"

"Was he driving it directly to the house?"

"You don't trust him?' You trust him enough to go into business with him, but not to drive your silly, expensive car?"

"I don't know where you got the idea that you could send him to pick up the car."

"I dropped him off. I paid the bill. *Your* bill. He's doing you a favor by driving it back to the house. A favor. Get it? Like you did for him."

"I don't need any favors."

"Of course you don't. You are so self-sufficient and self-involved. Why don't you ask me how my father is doing?

"I spoke to his doctor. I know how he is."

"You spoke to his doctor? When were you going to tell me this?"

"I did. I left you a message. You don't ever pay any attention to what I tell you, unless it's about another guy."

"Trust me, I'm not jealous of Shane. He can have you. They can all have you. Big Donnie, too. Every rotten stinking inch of you."

"Maybe I should take Carole up on her offer."

"What offer?"

"To fix me up with another guy."

"What?"

"She said there was a trainer I ought to meet."

"Go ahead," Jesse said. "Give me a reason to take you to the cleaners."

* * *

Jesse carried his irritation into the house, along with the flowers and the bag of scented candles. He put the flowers in a vase, brought them into the dining room table, placed the candles on the hutch and window sill and lit them with a lighter. Carole had always failed to recognize the depth of his feelings for Adam, as though the fact that they were gay men meant they were incapable of the same sort of attachments and bonds as heterosexual couples. It was no different than what most of the nation felt. Why had he believed

that he could make her change her view? He knew his relationship with Adam might not be an ideal role model for gay men, but as part of Jesse's family he was disappointed that Carole had made no effort to understand it. Family was family, even when it was by association and not by blood. Jesse doubted Carole's depth of feeling for his father. He believed the twenty-two-year age difference indicated Carole had only embarked on the marriage as a safety net for raising Melissa and a guarantee of future income. Was he as bigoted in his own way as Carole was? The fact that Carole had tried to break up his relationship with Adam wounded him. Distressed him. What had he ever done to provoke her into such a horrific course of action? As much as he disliked her, more and more each time he spoke to or saw her, he had never attempted to sabotage his father's relationship with Carole, had, in fact, gone to great measures to make Carole feel a part of the family. In the early days of her marriage to his father, he had tried to bond with her through phone calls, asking her what she thought of the Clintons ("Not much.") or Whitney Houston ("Too loud.") or God forbid, QVC ("Cheap and trashy."). Once, at a dinner party shortly after his father had wed her, Carole had become drunk and had walked with Jesse across the backyard and confessed that her one true love had been a boy in her high school who had ignored her so consistently that she was convinced he was gay. "He was too pretty and too smart," she said. "The kind of boy you want to rattle right down to the groin. He made me feel invisible and I vowed I would never let that happen again. I've never trusted a gay man since then. Are you sure you're showing me who you are or who you are *pretending* to be?"

It was subtly confrontational. She could not even pretend to like Jesse. *Or his kind.*

No wonder she disliked gay men, he thought. *They had all found her to be a greedy piece of cheap trash.*

In the kitchen Jesse checked the champagne glasses for spots, running a damp towel around the glass until they met his approval. The rain had stopped. Twilight was falling fast. Adam was standing beside the small walnut tree, looking at the ground and yellow leaves the rain had blown off the branches. Jesse knew he was waiting for

Shane to arrive. Adam was predictable, materialistic, worried that someone was driving away with one of his prized possessions. But he was also fiercely protective. There was the time, in Greve, a small town in Tuscany, when Jesse thought he had appendicitis. Adam rushed him to the nearest hospital, in Florence, and stayed with him through the examination, interpreting Jesse's pain for the Italian physician. Sure, it had tumbled into another fight, particularly when it was discovered that Jesse only had indigestion because he had eaten a caramel that he had bought at a local newsstand when Adam wasn't looking because he was starving, but when push came to shove, they were pushing each other *together.* Jesse pulled the silverware out of the kitchen drawer, his irritation rising to panic because there was suddenly so much to do before their dinner guests arrived. He went to the sliding glass door that led to the deck, stepped outside, and yelled at Adam, "Why don't you help out? This anniversary thing was your idea!"

Even the small dinner parties they threw were no longer easy. Tonight there would be two menus for four couples—one for the meat eaters and another for the vegetarians, with buffet variations on both. Natalie and Robyn were both vegan, though Natalie would eat fish and chicken on certain occasions, but Robyn would not. Robyn had been in Jesse's torts class that first disastrous year of law school. Robyn had graduated, passed the bar, and joined a firm and specialized in corporate securities. She and Jesse had remained casual friends, becoming better acquainted eleven years ago when Jesse had introduced her to Natalie at a New Year's Eve party they had thrown at their apartment. Natalie was a travel agent he worked with who specialized in honeymoon destinations and who, like Jesse, was desperate to extricate herself from a bad career choice. Robyn's firm was pressuring her to relocate to Brussels to handle the international work of her largest client, and, after falling for Natalie, she resigned and used her savings to buy and renovate a small farmhouse in Warner Township. In Pennsylvania, she and Natalie had experimented with a number of small businesses they could run together—office services, tax planning, public relations, before Natalie opened a small travel agency in Hellertown specializing in

vacation rental properties and Robyn got her real-estate license and began working for a local realtor.

Tonight, the ginger-butternut squash soup would be fine for all eight diners. The variations would begin with the salad, everyone getting a bowl of mesclun greens, the Lazy Susan carousel that Adam had bought at a flea market in Savannah would be used to hold bowls of apples and goat cheese and walnuts and croutons and vinaigrette dressing. Peter wouldn't eat the cheese, but Jesse couldn't serve the salad without it, and Rocco was allergic to nuts, so he had added a bowl of dried cranberries and raisins as a substitute. Rocco had been one of Stuart's early models, arriving in Manhattan with the hopes of getting a green card, a refugee from Havana via Miami. Stuart had spotted him at a restaurant in Soho where he was busing tables, offered to photograph him and then hired him to work as his assistant. Jesse had met him several times at Stuart's studio, and over the years he had chatted with Rocco at Stuart's exhibits and book signings. Rocco had become a commercial photographer—doing mainly food advertising and editorial layouts—and had never been a part of Jesse's circuit of city friends. Jesse had only rediscovered Rocco a few years ago when the Allentown newspaper had done a profile on Rocco's growing wedding photography business. Jesse had invited him over for a summer barbecue he was throwing for his single friends, where he met Wes, the brother of the new landscaper Adam was using to reconfigure the land around the house into small gardens. Jesse had believed that Rocco and Wes would never progress beyond a few dates—or a few sex hookups—however they were describing their infatuation. They were generations apart. Wes was in his early twenties and going part time to the community college while he helped his older brother out with his business. Four years later Wes and Rocco were still together, Wes had completed a business degree and was studying landscape architecture at an institute west of Philadelphia.

Wes had no food issues, unlike Adam who had acquired numerous food preferences. Nothing could be too simple for him anymore. His palate needed testing and challenging. Nothing was ever too spicy or too sweet. He liked to be a pampered man when

he sat down at the table. The curried leg of lamb was specifically for him, though Jesse knew that Matt would be the one to offer the most compliments. Adam had met Matt at the antiques fair at the Armory almost twenty years ago when he was pacing back and forth on the possibility of buying a quilt. Now, Matt was the first phone call Adam made when he was considering buying a new piece of art. Matt had been a retail coordinator for Macy's, working on department layouts and product displays before snapping his ties to the city and opening a home furnishings and antiques store in Stockton. Matt and Peter had met each other at Jesse and Adam's AIDS fundraising party, a catered evening Jesse had organized in the hopes of lifting his spirits in the wake of losing Clay, Nana, and Crazy back to back. Peter had been Clay's home-care attendant in the last days of his illness. Clay and Peter would spend days watching movies in Clay's apartment, and Jesse, visiting them in the evenings before Peter left, would watch them re-enact their favorite scenes or recite their favorite lines of dialogue. Clay had loved film noir and Hollywood melodramas the best, but Peter had a soft spot for movie musicals, particularly the Technicolor ones of the Fifties, the same ones which had left a strong impression on Jesse. Some nights there would be a little singing or footwork displayed before Peter headed out the door, Peter had even developed a good imitation of Bob Hope. Bob Hope, nervously ready to get out on the road. Jesse had kept in touch with Peter after Clay's death, meeting Peter for a movie or theater. Peter had been a good distraction for Jesse at a time when he needed it, even riding out to New Hope with him when he and Adam were house hunting, looking for that first weekend house that he and Adam wanted to buy. Jesse had set up Peter on several dates, but Peter had been reluctant to pursue any of them into a relationship, using the excuse of his HIV-positive status as a way to avoid any kind of commitment. Matt, beautiful Matt, Matt with the stylish haircut and the gym physique and the carefully coordinated wardrobe, had broken down the easy-going sloppy attired Peter by sheer persistence, phoning and phoning about the most insane items, or so Peter thought—paint chips, dried flower stems, baskets, leather sofas, until Peter realized that he enjoyed the

distractions and liked offering his opinions to someone willing to listen to them. Tonight was their fifteenth anniversary.

Peter had been asymptomatic for more than thirteen years until a New Year's trip to Buenos Aires with Matt to celebrate the new century had left him with a debilitating case of diarrhea that worsened into other health issues. In the last few years Jesse had found Peter's physical transformation disconcerting. His weight had never changed but his features had swollen and darkened—the steroid gut, the slight hunch at his neck, the veiny arms, the mottled skin, the sunken vertical lines along his face. On Peter's refrigerator now were charts and lists of food and their beneficial properties, as if each tiny box of facts were prompting Peter to eat more and more and would help him gain weight, or better yet, not drop too dangerously low. Cabbage would prevent constipation and help hemorrhoids. Honey aids digestion and fights allergies. Yoghurt guards against ulcers and strengthens bones. Tonight, Jesse had fixed the pasta and yoghurt vegetable sauce specifically for Peter, knowing the vegans would not find any issues with tossing their own variation of the ingredients. Jesse would sample both meals, though not before making sure he had taken his medication for acid reflux. He'd grown into a man with his own food issues, avoiding dairy products and tomatoes and starches so that he could indulge in a little more wine in the evenings.

Outside on the front porch of the house, Adam continued to wait for Shane. Jesse went to the refrigerator and found an open bottle of white wine and poured himself a glass. Even the champagne tonight would have an alternative. There would be the real stuff—the high end vintage that Adam craved and had bought the day before, and the alcohol-less variety for Peter. Jesse was arranging a platter of crackers and cheese for hors d'oeuvres when Adam came inside and asked, "Should I call the police?"

"About what?"

"The car."

"What about the car?"

"He's not here. Where's my car?"

"He might have used it to help out his friend."

"What friend?"

"The friend he borrowed the car from to drive me to see my dad at the hospital."

"You didn't tell me this."

"You didn't ask."

"Should I call the police?"

"And tell them what? 'Helloooo, Mister Policeman, my chubby homosexual lover let a teenage bodybuilder borrow my very, very expensive Carrera and he hasn't shown up yet to thank his Big Daddy.'"

"Not funny."

"Of course not. That's why you shouldn't call the police."

"When did he leave the dealer?"

"I told you."

"Then he should be here by now."

"Maybe he picked up one of his chicks and is doing her in the back seat."

"Not funny."

"Sorry. But it *is*."

* * *

Rocco and Wes were the first to arrive. Adam thought Wes cute but styleless, the kind of featureless and buff, straight-looking young gay man he would like to make over into a retro-clone, dressing him up in a flannel shirt, jeans, and growing out the black stubble into a mustache or goatee to give him more character. It was Rocco Adam had often imagined as a lover. There were times when he fantasized an attempted seduction, finding in Rocco the kind of chivalrous Latin lover Jesse was incapable of becoming. Rocco was just shy of six feet; his slender physique had matured into a barrel chest and a big gut. Adam found something exotic to him—the dark hair, the bedroom eyes, the caramel skin—a hint of another culture along with the tinge of an accent of English learned as a foreign language. Tonight Adam thought Rocco looked younger, perhaps having a

younger lover was a beneficial tonic, but Adam strayed from offering Rocco a compliment to watch the driveway through the window. He was still hoping Shane would show up with the Porsche, everything in perfect working order. He knew the car was finicky. He hated anyone else driving it but himself. Even Jesse. *Especially Jesse*. He was concerned about the car working properly, and, if not, about Shane's safety. Waiting, looking, he pushed his attention back to their guests and it occurred to Adam that Rocco had lost weight since he had last seen him, but it was Jesse who brought up the subject first.

"How did you do it?" Jesse asked Rocco. "I want to know every little secret!"

"Smaller portions," Rocco said.

"That's it? When I eat smaller portions I just get drunk faster."

"And nastier quicker," Adam added.

"See what I have to put up with?" Jesse said. "Honey bee, can I pour you a glass of champagne?"

"Only if you offer our guests one first."

The champagne was uncorked and Robyn and Natalie were at the door, arriving with baskets of squash and tomatoes they had grown in their garden. Suddenly, the conversation was about a farm less than a mile away that had been sold to a developer. "Four homes are planned," Robyn told Adam. "A mini-subdivision. It's only a matter of time before this whole area changes."

Adam took the news as another bombardment to his declining mood. The effects of Wade's massage were gone. He reached for a glass of champagne to deflect his rising edginess. Shane. Jesse and Shane. *Conspiring to ruin me. Abandon me. Make me lose my cool. Now suburbia was creeping up less than a mile away.*

"Champagne?" Jesse offered the women.

"I shouldn't," Natalie said. "We're hoping again."

Natalie arched her eyebrow at Adam. For more than a year, the two women had been contemplating having a child, visiting clinics, sperm banks, and soliciting the advice and opinions of friends and self-help books. Robyn was the one who had been attempting to be the birth-mother. Robyn, perky, plump, with blond highlights and super-organized, as if she had already won the audition for lesbian soccer

mom. *They must have discussed a change in course,* Adam thought. Natalie was the tall, flowing one, the one outside in the garden in the floppy straw hat and poncho-like blouses. Mother Earth.

"Do you know for sure?" Adam asked. He sounded too downbeat. Skeptical. He took another sip of champagne, trying to find a way to lighten his mood before Jesse trounced it into the ground.

"Only with a home test," Natalie said. "I'll see our doctor next week."

He grinned, felt his smile transform him. Wes asked the women if they wanted a boy or a girl.

"We'd be happy with either. Or both."

Jesse was telling Rocco about seeing Stuart for lunch the day before in the city when Matt and Peter arrived. There were more air kisses, more greetings. Soon everyone was holding a glass of champagne or its alternate, and had lifted their glasses to toast the anniversary couple.

"To more years and more happiness," Jesse said.

"That's right," Adam added. "You could end up like us."

A wave of nervous laughter crested when Rocco politely interrupted and said, "We've all got Jesse and Adam to thank for bringing us together."

"What date do you use?" Wes asked Matt. "First met? First date? First sex?"

"We met in March," Matt said. "We moved in together in October."

"And you?" Wes asked the women.

"New Year's Day," Natalie answered. "First kiss. We both knew. But we celebrate the L word. Six days later."

"She thinks she said it first," Robyn said. "But it had been bouncing in my head all day. She just wasn't in the room to hear me say it first."

Wes looked at Adam, but before he asked the question again, Adam answered, "First look," and blew a fake kiss at Jesse. "I knew it was love at first sight the moment I saw Jesse."

"I waited till I knew he wanted to be a doctor," Jesse added.

"And only a psychiatrist could put up with him."

* * *

The soup was a hit, the salad course a bit awkward, with the reaching and spinning selections on the Lazy Susan carousel, but the lamb and platters of pasta and vegetables were greeted with compliments. Wes helped Jesse bring the food from the kitchen to the dining room table, while Peter settled into a long story about being fourteen years old and sneaking off to a shopping mall in Denver to meet Debbie Reynolds.

Wes mentioned he would one day like to meet Bono or Sting, and around the table surfaced dreams of other would-be meetings: Maggie wanted to meet Susan Sarandon. Robyn, Lily Tomlin. Rocco, Antonio Banderas. Matt and Peter both picked Diane Keaton, "Not as so much for acting, but for her sense of style. Did you know she was a fabulous decorator?"

Jesse's choice was Rosie O'Donnell. "We're simpatico on Broadway musicals. We could get drunk and sing show tunes together and it would be a blast."

The comment did not elicit a response from Adam, which Jesse found unusual. Adam was gazing through the window, the darkness of the evening reflected back by the candles. A slight worry rose into Jesse's mind about Shane's whereabouts which was diminished by his enjoyment of Adam's anxiety. Adam, aware of being scrutinized, said he would have liked to have met Marlon Brando.

"I'd love to step inside his brain," Adam said. "To see what he thought."

"I doubt you are only interested in his *brain*," Jesse said.

"Not all of us want to get drunk and sing show tunes," Adam answered.

"Pity, that's what's wrong with the world!"

"Brando was a cultural catalyst," Adam continued. "He changed the image of the American young man from the guy next door to the wild one. Along with Elvis Presley and James Dean."

"And this is what you want to ask him about?" Jesse asked.

"No, dear," Adam answered. "I want to know how he ripped his T-shirt."

More names were bandied about. Streisand, Newman, and both Hepburns, Audrey and Kate. Peter asked what ever happened to Shirley MacLaine. "She was in every movie for a while and now she's in none." Others missed were Doris Day, Patty Duke, and Julie Christie. There was a group agreement that Garbo was right about retiring when she did, look how they had trotted out Ginger Rogers year after year, poor thing, and what was going to happen to Liz Taylor.

"She's a true hero," Jesse said. "We were seated near her once at an AIDS benefit in the city. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She was luminous. Her skin was so beautiful."

"What about her eyes?"

"Smart," Jesse answered. "You could see her intelligence behind them."

In the candlelight, faces softened, laughter flowed. Jesse, slightly drunk, was full of awe. *If only they could stay at this table forever*, he thought. *Friends. Lovers. Talking. Sharing. Connecting.* Something had happened in the room, he understood that, that was keeping them all in the same place for a few moments.

Adam, finishing his lamb, was struck by the use of the word "we." "We're planning to go to London." "We thought about adopting." "We're trying a new cycle of medications." Twenty-four years ago it was different. Twenty-four years ago he was single, a lone "I" brought to a party on the Upper West Side by an unexpected invitation by their friend Clay. Such a cold night it had been. He'd felt the force of the wind right into his bones. Adam had always allowed Jesse the privilege of saying he knew Clay better. Adam had met Clay when he had walked across campus with his guitar, planning an audition for the university glee club, knowing that the extracurricular activities would be a plus when he began applying to medical schools. Clay, two years older and a junior, was monitoring the sign-in table. When Adam came out of the audition smiling, saying he had made the cut, Clay asked him if he acted too. He was planning to direct a campus production of *My Fair Lady*, and was looking for guys who could pull off playing "all those old fogeys."

Adam was hesitant to confess the impact that musical had

had on his psyche. A young man who looked older than he was. A grown-up face. A wise soul. "You just looked more mature than the rest of us," Clay had joked one night when Adam had brought up the topic. "You looked like you were always headed to being a doctor."

If he could travel back through time would he do it different? Live a different life? Be younger in spirit? *Wilder? Reckless? More ambitious?* If what he knew now—if he could see the man he would become, the identity he had forged together with Jesse—would it be his choice to continue in that direction? He hadn't been kidding earlier in the evening when he remarked on his immediate infatuation with Jesse. He had wanted something to happen. He had wanted to step into Jesse's life.

He drank the last sip of wine in his glass, shifted his attention from the table to outside the house. He felt both the emptiness and suspense of waiting. He hated this loss of control. He only wanted to know what was going to happen next.

* * *

They had never given up on each other. Not after fight after fight after fight. Love was not a raw emotion, but a game of psychology of gives and takes that was never finished.

"Why have you never married?" Robyn asked Jesse when there was a pause in the conversation at the table.

Jesse tilted his eyes to Adam.

"I want to spend every day with Jesse," Adam answered. "Why do I need a ring to show that?"

Jesse laughed and said to his guests, "That's a nice way of saying he lost the ring."

"You're married?" Peter asked. "You didn't tell me this!"

"Married is such a strong word," Adam said. "And not recognized in this state between two men."

"We had lawyers work it out for us," Jesse said. "His and mine."

"It cost us a fortune but it's ironclad on both sides," Adam added.

"And sealed with a kiss, right, honey bee?"

Adam smiled and nodded. "The day we signed our agreement we exchanged rings."

"Only Adam conveniently lost his."

"It was an accident."

"Accidentally on purpose. The day after we were 'married.'"

"I was working out in the yard," Adam began.

"Something he rarely does, but our gardener was here for the day and if you have ever seen Jason, then you know why Adam was helping him out."

"Jason who works at the garden center on 611?" Peter asked.

"Yep, him," Jesse answered.

"I'd take my ring off too," Peter said. Around the table everyone laughed and nodded and looked to Adam to finish the tale.

"I was working on the trellis near the barn and I had to come into the house to find some work gloves in the basement. I swear I took the ring off and left it in the kitchen as I was headed back out into the yard," Adam said. "In the bowl where we keep the car keys. It wasn't there when I looked for it later, after Jason had left and I had cleaned up from all the digging."

"He thinks I took it because I wanted to get rid of him," Jesse said. "What he has I have. What I have he has."

"See, a true marriage in all of its definitions," Adam said. "We checked everywhere for the ring. We disemboweled the vacuum cleaner several times. I took the trellises apart and put them back together again, thinking I might have dropped the ring in the yard. No luck."

"I've told him that all we have to do to replace it is to get married again!" Jesse said.

"I'm not marrying Jesse again just to replace the ring."

"But I'd marry you over and over."

"I'd marry you again if we worked out a new agreement."

"No chance, honey bee. Negotiations are closed."

* * *

Jesse was slicing the cake. Wes distributed the plates around the dining room table. Adam reached for his pager to check the number of the incoming call. Jesse detected Adam's movement for his cellphone and in the next second the kitchen phone was ringing. Instinctively, Jesse knew it was about the same thing as Adam's call. He handed the knife to Peter and went into the kitchen.

A few minutes later, the fight erupted.

"I'm taking your car to the hospital," Adam shouted to Jesse.

"No, you're not," Jesse yelled back. "Not with that temper."

"The hospital called. The police are there."

"I just spoke to them. You're not going alone."

"You've had too much to drink."

"Not too much to knock you flat."

Adam moved to push Jesse out of his way.

"You lay one little finger on me and I'll have the police all over you," Jesse said. "You're lucky I didn't have the cops on you for slashing my tires."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean."

Jesse said to their shocked guests, "We let a teenager borrow Adam's car. There's been an accident. We need to go to the hospital. Please, *please*, enjoy the dessert."

"*You* let him take the Porsche."

"And *you* paid him to slash my tires. I know you did it. I know you like a book. Cause and effect, Sherlock. *We* let him borrow your car. You're not weaseling your way out of any of this."

The party moved swiftly from the dining room to the foyer and the front door. Rocco impulsively offered to drive Jesse and Adam to the hospital, but Jesse said he would prefer if they would stay and keep Matt and Peter entertained. It was their evening, after all, this was just an unfortunate disruption. There was port and Grand Marnier and champagne and all sorts of after-dinner liquors they could try if they wanted. "And snoop around the house, if you want," Jesse added. "See if we've got any deep, dark secrets you want to auction off on eBay."

The make-do pleasantries and smooth-over conversation gave

Adam the opportunity to reach the Saab and start the car. Jesse ran outside to the driveway as Adam was backing out. He beat on the hood of the car with his fist for Adam to stop.

"I swear I am going to have you put into jail," Jesse yelled at Adam. He jumped inside the car. "Stealing *my* car."

"You could never prove it in court. Not with all those damned papers you made me sign."

"Don't make me try. Believe me, I could get plenty of advice from my dad."

Jesse waved to their bewildered guests standing on the porch swatting away the moths circling the outdoor house lights. He rolled down his window and yelled, "We'll be back as soon as we can. Enjoy yourselves."

"Stop making a fool of yourself," Adam yelled.

"They're our guests!" Then, mad, he added, "No, they're *my* guests, since you can't lift a finger to help out—not even to get an ice cube. They're *my* guests and *my* friends and *I* want them to have fun so *I* am going to yell to them. *Have fun! Break all the china! Slash the art! Set everything on fire! Daddy Big Bucks here is well insured!*"

"Stop it. You're becoming hysterical."

"And you're a picture of tranquility?"

They drove the next two miles in silence. Seething silence. Until Adam asked Jesse, "Are we going on like this for the rest of our lives? *Fighting?*"

"You have a better idea?"

"What happened to us?"

"Nothing has happened to us."

"We don't seem to love each other anymore."

"What are you talking about? This has everything to do with love. We are still *us*. This is not me against you or you against me. This is *us together* trying to reach a resolution."

Adam drove in silence, not responding, until Jesse added, "Unless you feel differently."

"You know I'm never going to find someone else like you," Adam said. The compliment briefly soothed Jesse, until the guilt returned

over abandoning his dinner guests. In his mind he played through the events at the dealership earlier in the day—remembering Shane's thrill at having a chance to drive the Porsche. He began to worry about what sort of damages awaited at the hospital—happiness ruined by an accident.

Adam circled the hospital to park the car in the back lot. Jesse, with an almost-sob in his voice, asked, "Is he okay?"

"They had just brought him in. Mitchell, a guy I know, called me."

"The car was totaled."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you were too angry."

"Who told you it was totaled?"

"The cop who called the house."

Adam beat the steering wheel and let out a string of expletives. "Do you know what this is going to do to my rates?"

"*Your rates*? Is that what you are worried about? *Your rates?* A kid is in the hospital because of that rotted-out genital horseshit you drive, and you are worried about *your rates?* You just better hope that he's not going to sue the pants off of you."

"*Us*," Adam said as he stepped out of the car.

"*You*," Jesse yelled at Adam. He was following close behind Adam's long-legged stride.

Adam stopped on a grassy knoll. He turned to Jesse and yelled, "*Us*, Watson. *Us! You are just as much a part of this as I am. You let him drive the car!*"

Jesse lifted his fist up to challenge Adam. It was a mock taunt, not a true threat. Adam, angered, slapped the fist away. Jesse reacted with a real slap with his other hand. It landed against Adam's shoulder. Adam pushed Jesse away. Jesse tugged at Adam's shirt before losing his balance. He brought them both to the ground.

Where the fight continued.

Jesse ripped Adam's shirt. Adam used his fist to break Jesse's hold. Their clothes became black from the damp ground. Grass and leaves stuck to their hair. Jesse rolled and pressed his weight against Adam's body. Adam reached his hands up to strangle Jesse.

They rolled over again. Jesse slapped away Adam's hands, yelled out, "*What are you doing?*" He reached up to strangle Adam's neck. Adam lost his balance. They rolled down the hill toward the hospital doors. *A steep decline, like the slope of a ski jump*. Adam thought it was like being caught off balance by a wave at the beach and trying to surface for air. Jesse felt it was like having too many martinis and trying to keep your balance. At the bottom of the hill they were both gasping from their near-death tumble. They stood up and swatted at each other again. They were wet and ragged and out of breath. Both men were laughing and panting.

* * *

But the fight wasn't over.

"Go to your office," Jesse said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, go to your office. I'll handle this."

"You will not."

"You're too hot headed. You'll create a stink."

"Me?"

"*You*."

"I'm a doctor here, they will listen to me."

"Adam, you're involved in this."

"And you're not? You let him drive my car."

"*Our* car. Stay out of it."

"I want to know what happened."

"I'll tell you. When I find out."

Adam, broken, bowed his head to the ground. "*Why?*" he said. It was a plea for help.

"*Because*," Jesse answered.

* * *

Jesse found Shane in the emergency room, stretched out on a hospital bed walled off by thick plastic curtains. He was bruised and rattled, but fine. There were no broken bones. No cuts. No stitches.

He was jittery and talkative, punctuating his phrases with, "Can you believe it, dude?" and "Lady Luck was watching over me." He had used the Porsche to drive back to the abandoned hatchback at the hospital in New Jersey to offer help to Paul and his brother.

They had gotten the hatchback running. Paul and his brother in the hatchback followed Shane in the Porsche back to Pennsylvania. Shane was planning to drop off the Porsche for Adam, then ride with Paul and his brother to get his motorcycle. They had exited the Interstate near Easton and were traveling on the small back roads that were familiar to both drivers. The sudden heavy rain and winds had left the roads covered with damp, fallen leaves. Shane said that driving the Porsche was awesome, like slicing butter with a steak knife, smooth and easy—he wasn't speeding—he was gliding, soft and gentle, up and over the hilly terrain. The hatchback took the curves easily, but the tires of the Porsche hydroplaned over the wet leaves and swerved out of control. Shane attempted to turn out of a spin when the steering wheel locked up on him. The spinning Porsche landed in a ditch and rolled over twice before coming to a stop.

"It was real freaky," Paul said. He had seen it happen out of his rear view mirror. He and his brother had called the police and brought Shane to the hospital. "It was like it was made of cardboard. The wind just lifted it up into the air."

Jesse suppressed his urge to flirt with the young men. Paul and his brother were as adorable as Shane, and under other circumstances Jesse would have turned on the charm. Instead, he played the role of the apologetic adult, not his best role, but one he knew showed his sincerity. "It's *my* fault for letting you take the car," Jesse said to Shane. "I should have known better. I am so thankful that you are okay. That car has always been a piece of crap."

"I just don't want the doc mad," Shane said.

"The doc?"

"I know how he loves that car."

"We all know how much he loves that car," Jesse said.

"Dude, I'd love that car if I had it," Paul said.

Jesse smiled at the young man, noticing he had gorgeous blue eyes and a dark stubble at his chin. He held back his imagination, his

fantasizing, but couldn't help thinking how attractive Paul was and how much fun it was simply watching him talk and shrug his shoulders.

"Doc is gonna be mad," Shane said. "Hell, it wasn't my fault."

"No one's blaming you for anything," Jesse said, with a low, serious tone to his voice, hoping he might seem more adult to the young men. "Adam will forget it soon enough."

"I can make it up to him. Tell him I can get him a great deal on a laptop. Something he could use in his office."

Jesse offered up a little lie on Adam's behalf, saying he was on call and with a patient and the reason why he had not stopped by the emergency room. An intern arrived at the partition with a policeman, who had arrived to speak with Shane. Jesse took control of the situation, as if he were the parent in the room. He asked about the totaled Porsche—where it was, where it had been taken, what sort of reports were to be filed, what was to happen next. Adam, two floors away in his office, conjured up worst-case scenarios, gave up to exhaustion, and laid his head on his desk until Jesse called and said everything was resolved and the only thing hurt was everyone's pride.

Jesse stayed with Shane until he was released, arranging with the admitting clerk to have the bills for the ambulance and emergency room tests sent to Dr. O'Donnell for payment. Outside in the parking lot, the night air was fresh and breezy. A chill hung in the air. Winter would be coming soon, but not too soon. In the dark and the lamplight Jesse thought Shane and his buddies looked impish and mischievous, like little boys, huddled together trying to decide the best way to light stolen fireworks. He longed to spend more time with them, to join them for a smoke or a drink or another thrill ride, to let Adam wait and wait and wait in his office, stewing, squirming, miserable. Jesse offered to drive Shane home, but Paul said they were all going back to his place where Shane had left his motorcycle that morning.

"I'm sorry I was so self-involved today," Jesse said to Shane, as if he were a father making amends to his long-neglected son. "I never asked you what kind of business you wanted to start."

"A brewery."

"A *brewery*? You want to make *beer*?"

"High end. You know. Good stuff."

"Okay. *Okay*. We could make it work."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if Adam goes all ballistic on you about the car, which he won't, by the way, because I won't let him, but if he *does*, if he pretends to go all ballistic and pretentious and stupid-acting, then I'll pick up the slack. I've been looking for something to keep me off the streets. You know. We could make it business. He likes you. I like you. You seem like a good kid. A real smart hustler. *Businessman*. We can make it a family business. *Our* family. You. Me. Adam. If you still want the partners. I could even be a silent partner. Well, I could *try* to be the silent partner."

"Sure," Shane said. "But you'll need to talk to my lawyer."

"Your lawyer?"

"Doc told me I needed one."

"He's the one that's going to need a lawyer. A team of lawyers. Trust me on that."

* * *

It was late when they returned to the house. Their guests were gone. The table was cleaned, the dishes were in the dishwasher. Peter and Matt had left a note thanking Adam and Jesse for "another memorable night." Jesse would call Matt the next morning and smooth things over, make arrangements to take them out to dinner, maybe to see a movie. He'd call the other couples too, explain what happened in detail, and find ways to make amends.

Adam sorted through the papers he kept in a small roll-top desk in the small room he used as a library. He found the name of his insurance rep and placed a call.

Later, he went upstairs to the bedroom. Jesse was in bed, watching an Audrey Hepburn movie. It was the one where she fights with Albert Finney.

"I love this movie," Jesse said, when Adam stopped in front of the television. "It's so good."

Adam nodded. He watched the screen and listened to the music swell in the background of a fight. "They're so right for each other and for a while they are so happy."

"Shane said you owed him a hundred bucks." Jesse said.

"*What?*"

"You lost the football pool."

Adam sat on the edge of the bed and shook his head. He was too tired to be angry, too tired to cry, too wiped out to laugh.

"Don't worry," Jesse said. "I covered for you."

"I'm sorry," Adam said. "I didn't mean to dump on you."

"I don't mind, you know that. I like doing things for you. I want to do things for you."

They got up, one at a time, to do their evening toiletries—brush teeth, floss, pinch their jowls, take sleeping pills, and assess their physiques in the mirror. Adam had a bruise along his waist from the rumble. Jesse had red circles on his neck from Adam's thumbprints.

Adam was the first to fall asleep, but not before looking up at Jesse and saying, "Shane told me about your offer. I spoke to him on the phone. Go ahead. The Porsche is going to wipe me out."

Jesse nodded and returned to watching the movie.

"You haven't said what you want to do. Twenty-fifth. It's next month."

"I'm concerned about my father. A trip doesn't seem right."

"What about the city? We could go back for a weekend. Splurge a little. Dinner. See a show. Watch the parade like old-timers."

Jesse caught Adam's eyes. "That sounds right."

Jesse was now exhausted. He was almost asleep when Adam's snoring woke him. "Roll over," Jesse said, tugging his partner's shoulder.

Adam did, his arm reaching out instinctively to embrace Jesse. Jesse threaded his fingers through Adam's. He placed their hands against the rise of his stomach, the way he did when they had slept together on the narrow bed on Tenth Street. Adam pressed his lips against the back of Jesse's neck. Jesse lifted their hands and kissed the back of Adam's.

They slept like that undisturbed through the night. Adam dreamed of importing a new car from Europe, something classic, with sleek, elegant lines. Jesse dreamed he was starring in a musical, a role written especially for him.

And the next day some things were better. Other things were worse.

But mostly things were better.

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About the Author

Jameson Currier is the author of five novels: *Where the Rainbow Ends*, a Lambda Literary finalist, *The Wolf at the Door, The Third Buddha, What Comes Around,* and *The Forever Marathon*; and four collections of short fiction: *Dancing on the Moon; Desire, Lust, Passion, Sex; Still Dancing: New and Selected Stories;* and *The Haunted Heart and Other Tales,* which was awarded a Black Quill Award. His short fiction has appeared in many literary magazines and Web sites, including *Blithe House Quarterly*, *Velvet Mafia, Confrontation, Christopher Street,* and the anthologies *Men on Men 5, Best American Gay Fiction 3, Certain Voices, Best Gay Erotica, Best American Erotica, Best Gay Romance, Best Gay Stories, Circa 2000, Rebel Yell, Wilde Stories, Unspeakable Horror, Art from Art,* and *Making Literature Matter.* In 2010 he founded Chelsea Station Editions, an independent press devoted to gay literature, and the following year launched the literary journal *Chelsea Station*.

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